

Giovanni Battista Della Porta

Italian sculptor
(ca.1542-1597)

Son of Alessio, whose profession is unknown, and of a Battistina, he was born in Porlezza (Como) in 1542. Grandson of the famous sculptor Tommaso Della Porta the Elder, second cousin of Guglielmo Della Porta, also a famous sculptor, Della Porta had two presumably younger brothers who worked with him: John Paul and, above all, Thomas the Younger. In 1580, he married Elisabetta Mariottini in Rome, with whom he had a daughter, Barbara, who gave him birth.

It is not known exactly when Della Porta came to Rome, but when in 1562 his uncle Tommaso received the title of knight, it was established that at his death this honor passed to Della Porta; one can therefore deduce that in 1562 he was already active together with his uncle in the field of restoration of ancient sculptures. The fact that the company between uncle and nephew was very strict explains why Baglione ascribed to Della Porta the sale of the heads of the twelve emperors to Cardinal Alessandro Farnese rather than to Tommaso, who was the real seller. In 1566 Della Porta is mentioned in the documents for having committed a small crime for which his uncle was a guarantor. The first known work of Della Porta is the ten *Nymphs* for the Ovato fountain at Villa d'Este in Tivoli.

The contract of July 1567 included ten 120 cm tall figures of peperino covered in stucco, which had to be placed in the ten niches of the fountain that Curzio Maccarone was building; he also established the price of 10 scudi each; the statues had to be completed on three sides according to the design of Ligorio and the whole work had to be finished by the next month of September, otherwise the price would have been halved. A statue had already been completed; eight nymphs are still existing although very deteriorated. The contract also mentions a statue of *Rome*, which was entrusted however in August 1568 to Pietro Motta for the same price offered to Della Porta (70 scudi). It is not known whether Della Porta renounced the appointment or if he was removed, but the same thing seems to have happened in the case of the colossal statue of *Tiberius*, owned by Hippolytus d'Este, which was left unfinished by Della Porta December 1567, entrusted to two other sculptors for completion.

Perhaps Della Porta was looking for better jobs as it appears evident from a letter from Rome on 11 November 1566, of the bishop Garimberto to Cesare Gonzaga, lord of Guastalla, in which he recommended "Maestro Giovanbattista sculptor, nephew of the Master Thomosino... in restoring and tidying up his antiques". It is perhaps at this point that Della Porta became a friend of Francesco Capriani da Volterra, the architect of Cesare Gonzaga in Guastalla, with whom he would often work in the future: for example around 1569 Francesco da Volterra and Della Porta became respectively the architect and the sculptor of the Caetani house. In any case, the relationship of Della Porta with Cesare Gonzaga is confirmed by a letter sent to the latter by the Roman antiquarian Iacopo Strada in June 1568 in which Della Porta is defined "very servitor of your Excellentia".

Della Porta received his longest and most important assignment in the sculptural field at the S. Casa di Loreto: ten *Sibyls* and three *Prophets* for the covering.

In April 1570 Della Porta, probably accompanied by his brother Tommaso, was in Loreto where he received an advance of 50 florins (25 scudi) for "sibille che fa". The payments continued in 1570, in 1571, until 1572. A letter from May of that year attests that six *Sibyls* were finished, three close to the end and that Della Porta had to be paid 200 scudi for each statue, while he asked 250. In July 1572 the governor of Loreto wrote to the Grand Duke of Tuscany announcing the imminent arrival of Della Porta to Carrara to procure four pieces marble for the coating; the trip must have taken place in the autumn since in November the travel expenses were reimbursed to Della Porta. In December the ten *Sibyls* were finished and Della Porta was satisfied with the payment of the 800 scudi; it seems that he had donated a statue for "limosine et for his divotione". In 1573 Della Porta was again in Carrara working at least two blocks of marble "for the 4 prophets" of the Holy House; he was paid two months to work out the figures, transportation and travel expenses.

At this point Della Porta presumably returned to Rome: in August 1574 he was listed among the Virtuosi del Pantheon and must have received around that same period the task of carving a *Risen Christ* and two *Angels* for the new altar of the Ss. Sacramento in S. Giovanni in Laterano. From 1574 Francesco da Volterra had been the architect of this project by Pope Gregory XIII, but the only document relating to the participation of Della Porta dates back to May 1576 when he himself and "the sculptors" received the final payment for a total of 200 scudi for the three figures. The altar, destroyed in 1599.

In December 1576 Della Porta was again in Loreto where he was paid for the transport of "4 marbles to make prophets" from Naples to Recanati. In May 1578 he was given an advance for the Prophets and another payment was made in July; and another, again in July, of 690 florins for "a prophet". In December Thomas was paid for a prophet and in 1579 G. Lombardo was paid for another, *Amos*. The final account of the Holy House shows only a sum related to these three prophets, so the question on how the fourth piece of marble transported by Della Porta to Loreto was used is added to the problem attributive to the existing statues of the cladding, if go to Della Porta, to Thomas, or both together. On the basis of a stylistic analysis, the prophets *Balaam* and *Moses* are usually attributed to Della Porta. Although Della Porta had finished his work for the Holy House in the spring of 1578, he continued to work for Loreto; in June 1578, Cardinal Nicolò Caetani commissioned Francesco da Volterra to design his tomb in the basilica.

For this task Francesco da Volterra agreed with Della Porta, who in October 1578 received 300 of the 1,650 scudi promised for his work for the tomb, "pro opera constructionis sepulchri". In 1579 the decree carved the figures of the *Faith* and *Charity* in Rome and the following year the monument, sent from Rome, was erected in Loreto under the direction of Della Porta. Given the amount of the sum Della Porta was to be responsible both for the supply and for the working of the marble for the tomb, as well as for the two standing figures flanking the portrait statue of the cardinal, executed in bronze by A. Calcagni. He was not very busy at the beginning of the ninth decade if in February 1583 he wrote to Vespasiano Gonzaga, duke of Guastalla, of his uncle Tommaso's esteem for him and offering to sell him an ancient statue that had been restored. He wrote again in April 1584 asking whether the statues (without

specifying which ones) were liked by the duke and promised to send him four "pieces of the story... to adorn the dressing room". For pope Sixtus V, Della Porta worked at least two projects, both directed by the papal architect Domenico Fontana: the reconstruction and decoration of the chapel of the Nativity of Santa Maria Maggiore, later called the Sistine Chapel, and the monumental façade of the Moses fountain, following the restoration of the Felice aqueduct. In July 1586 Sixtus V had decided to spend 25,000 scudi for the tomb in S. Maria Maggiore of his predecessor and protector, the Dominican Pope Pius V (died in 1572). The organizer of the sculptural project, Leonardo Sormani, who drew the bronze portrait of the pope, erected in June 1587, received a first payment in December 1587 of 300 scudi, and others in April and September 1588, to be shared with the sculptors P. Antichi, F. Vacca, GA Valsoldo, PP Oliviero and Della Porta, author of the statue of *S. Domenico*.

The figure of the saint, flat, schematic and somewhat banal, anticipates in style his next and most extensive work: the relief, more than 3 m high, with *Aaron leading the Jewish people to quench their thirst*, for the fountain of Moses in Rome. Here the heavy and flat figures, the overcrowded space, which seems to burst, form, however, an appropriate accompaniment to the great and irrepressible *Moses that hits the rock* of Antichi and Sormani with which Sixtus V celebrated in theatrical form the arrival of the new aqueduct in Rome. The creation the fountain for the Acqua Felice was announced in July 1587 and Della Porta was paid, between 1588 and 1590, a total of 1,000 scudi, although the estimate had been 1,350..

Immediately after the last payment for the *Aronne*, in March 1590, on April 30, Della Porta made testament: there is a Roman citizen, residing in Campo Marzio and claims to leave the furniture to his young wife, Elisabetta Mariottini, whom he had married in October 1580, and all the rest to the brothers Giovanni Paolo and Tommaso (who in turn, in his will in 1583, had left him ("5 petia statuarum modernarum").

During 1590 Della Porta worked on two important sepulchral projects, in Rome and at Sabbioneta. At S. Silvestro al Quirinale he sculpted the portrait bust for the cenotaph in memory of Federico Corner, who died in the same year, cardinal in Padua, where he was buried. Erected by the will of Gregory XIV, the cenotaph was designed by D. Fontana; Della Porta was paid 125 scudi for his collaboration in January 1591.

The Card. Scipione Gonzaga, in a letter of April 1591 - in which he recommended to the Duke of Mantua Della Porta as "very intendente of architecture and statues" and in which he remembered how he himself possessed two statues of Della Porta - asserted that the sculptor was called to Sabbioneta "for the burial of Signor Duca di Sabioneta". It is Vespasiano Gonzaga with whom Della Porta had worked between 1583 and 1584 and who had died in February 1591, having asked in the will to his heirs to spend 1,500 scudi for his grave, in addition to the stone he had already done bring from Rome. The impressive parietal tomb in the Church of the Incoronata appears in a document designed by the "Knights of the Door": certainly Della Porta, who also supplied the stone. The tomb, however, is almost the exact copy of the Caetani tomb of Loreto in 1578, conceived by Francesco da Volterra. Although no documents remain, the two figures of *Justice* and *Fortress*, in the side niches, which flank the bronze statue of *Vespasiano*, the work of Leone Leoni, are evidently the work of Della Porta.

In these same years Della Porta was working again for the Caetani family: in 1589 he designed the marble coat of arms of the Duke Onorato Caetani for the internal door of the church of S. Maria della Vittoria in Sermoneta, and in 1590 the marble bust of the same Onorato, who died in November 1592 (his catafalque was designed by Francesco Capriani da Volterra); his tomb plate, decorated with bronze plaques depicting military trophies, was performed by Della Porta within 1593, for 250 scudi. The tomb, restored, is now in the family chapel at S. Pudenziana. In 1595 Della Porta, as attested by the documents, provided the stone necessary for the Rusticucci chapel in the church of Gesu.

Enrico Caetani, became cardinal of S. Pudenziana in 1585, in 1587 had entrusted the direction of the restoration of the church to Francesco da Volterra. which was associated with Della Porta "for all that concerned the marbles". After Capriani's death (1594), the work continued perhaps under the Olivier who carved the marble relief for the altar, and was still underway in 1601 when Maderno intervened. Della Porta, therefore, had to be engaged in S. Pudenziana again in 1597, the year of his death. After his death his work was evaluated by Oliviero 3,366 scudi, a sum that was paid to the brothers Giovanni Paolo and Tommaso, following a dispute with the Caetani, in December 1601. At the same time the latter had worked with Della Porta for the Caetani, receiving a final payment in December 1598.

In the last year of his life, in the same church of S. Pudenziana, Della Porta carried out the most important, the marble group in life size with the *delivery of the keys*, to commemorate the place where it was supposed that S. Peter had celebrated a Mass. The sculpture was commissioned by Msgr. Desiderio Collini, protonotary and apostolic secretary; the contract of June 15, 1596, established that the chapel, the altar and the statues were finished in eight months, according to an existing design, for the sum of 1,300 scudi and that the *Christ* and *S. Pietro* were "in imitatione" of those of the church of S. Agostino.

On 15 October 1597, an inventory was made of the assets found in his house after his death. This fact confirms that Della Porta died in 1597. He was buried in the church of S. Maria del Popolo. His widow, who immediately remarried with C. Maderno, died in 1602.

At the time of death, Della Porta lived in Via del Corso. The inventory of his properties clearly shows that he was a wealthy man.

by Carrol Brentano - Biographical Dictionary of Italians - Volume 37 (1989)

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