

Diego da Careri

Italian sculptor and Franciscan monk
(1607-1661)

He was born in Careri (currently the province of Reggio Calabria) on 5 April. 1606 by Giulio Giurato and by an Elisabetta and was baptized with the name of Giovanni Leonardo.

We have various information on this sculptor, a lay friar of the Order of Reformed Minors, thanks to a biography written in 1702 by one of his nephews, news taken up in later sources, almost all of a monastic nature. The ancient biographies were written to highlight his exemplary life from a religious point of view, so as to attribute to Diego miracles performed before and after his death; in these sources the information relating to his artistic production is given almost incidentally, but it is in any case sufficient to reconstruct his activity, at least roughly.

Growing up in a large family, of ancient Spanish origin, Diego showed his religious vocation from an early age; he completed the year of novitiate, probably in 1626, at the reformed convent of S. Maria di Gesù di Bovalino, not far from Careri, assuming the name Diego on that occasion. Before entering the monastery he had already ventured into works of sculpture which had favorably impressed his fellow citizens. Precisely to allow the young man to continue practicing this art, his superiors had him transferred to the convent of S. Maria delle Grazie in Catanzaro, where conspicuous works were in progress and where therefore various artists must have been gathered together.

From Catanzaro Diego passed to the convent of S. Francesco di Gerace and subsequently in the convent of S. Maria degli Angeli di Monteleone (today Vibo Valentia), where he executed works now lost. The stay in Monteleone was quite important because it allowed Diego to study the works of Antonello Gagini preserved in that city, sculptures that certainly inspired him in the creation of numerous statues executed even many years later.

The next stop in his wanderings was the convent of S. Maria degli Angeli in Badolato (Catanzaro), where his oldest works are kept; these sculptures are attributed to him in the manuscript chronicle of the convent.

The artistic activity of a Franciscan sculptor had a prevailing devotional function which partly explains the cultural delay, which can be found in the reference to A. Gagini, even though Diego worked mainly in wood. It is likely that his artistic training took place alongside a religious sculptor, since it is very difficult to think that he was completely self-taught. He therefore acquired from the beginning of his activity a pietistic approach, still substantially counter-reformist, for which the work had above all to exalt the religious sentiment of the faithful. Numerous Franciscan artists were active in Calabria and Fra 'Umile da Petralia, of Sicilian origin, the most famous author of crucifixes of his time.

Diego arrived in Badolato around 1640; it is documented that the decoration of the altar had already been carried out in 1644. Probably in that same year Diego moved to Naples. According to sources, one of his brothers had been involved in a murder and had been sentenced to death by the viceroy of Naples, from whom Diego went to ask for pardon for his relative. He would have succeeded in this task also thanks to the presentation and protection of an important exponent of his Order, Giovanni Mazzara of Naples, a very influential man at court and future general minister of the Order from 1645.

Urged by his religious superiors and, it seems, by the viceroy himself, Diego stayed in Naples: first in the convent of S. Croce ad Palatium and then in that of S. Maria del Pozzo in Somma Vesuviana. During his stay he worked above all for the church of S. Maria degli Angeli, built by Cosimo Fanzago. Here he executed the decoration of the high altar depicting the *Assumption* among angels, the statues for some side altars dedicated to *St. Clare*, *St. Elizabeth*, *St. Francis*, a *Crucifix* and the cabinets containing the relics within thirty-six busts of saints. It was therefore a very conspicuous and demanding work in which Diego was certainly helped by some pupils. The four groups of statues in wood once again show their dependence on Gagini models. In the statues of the side altars, the idea of placing groups of seraphim under the feet of the saints, instead of a traditional base, is quite original, an idea often witnessed in contemporary pictorial works.

The most interesting statue is certainly that of *St. Francis*. The saint is depicted in the center of a mandorla formed by the heads of seraphim and himself provided with wings. He has an extremely composed appearance with a classical setting and only in the inclination of the head and in the expression of the face appear contained accents of pathos. The work was also enlivened by chromatic effects that focused on the contrast between the dark tone of the habit and the gilding of the angelic crown. The decoration of the church must have been carried out between 1644 and 1648, the year in which Father Giovanni da Napoli died and Father Daniele da Dongo succeeded him in the office of vicar general. The latter ordered the immediate transfer of Diego to Rome and from there to Dongo (Como). Here, in the convent of S. Maria del Fiume, he created the plastic decoration of two chapels, sculpting a total of twenty-four statues divided into the two groups of the *Last Supper* and the *Crucifixion*, certainly assisted in this case too by some collaborators including Fra Giovanni da Reggio.

The decoration of these two chapels is part of the phenomenon of the so-called "Sancta Sanctorum," which arise numerous in Piedmont and Lombardy: inside a chapel, paintings and sculptures in the round reconstruct the salient episodes of the life of Christ or of the Madonna to solicit the prayer and devotion of the faithful.

The two chapels of Dongo have a pictorial decoration, executed in 1603 by Andrea Gabasio, which does not match the statues. In the chapel of the Eucharist the thirteen figures, arranged around a "U" table, are little more than life-size, dressed in old-fashioned, soberly painted. The artist's desire to create a realistic scene prompted him, for example, to meticulously depict the furnishings and food on the table, all carved in wood. The sculptor made an effort above all to make evident the different reaction of the apostles to Jesus' accusation through differentiated gestures and expressions. The overall effect is that of a strong and at the same time naive dramatization of the event.

During his stay in Lombardy, the sculptor also worked for the church of S. Croce in Como and for the convent of S. Giacomo in Castello near Lecco, where probably in 1654 the statues of S. Giovanni Evangelista e di Maria.

Probably Diego was still in Lombardy in 1654. It is not known when he received the order to move to Sicily from Father Michelangelo Bongiorno, elected general minister in 1658. Perhaps close to this date, returning south, Diego stopped in Rome, where he sculpted the statues of *S. Francesco a Ripa* in the church of S. Francesco a Ripa. S. Anthony and of S. Francesco. However, it is not known how long he stayed in Rome or if he went there more than once.

On the altar of S. Antonio in the left transept there is the homonymous wooden statue while that of S. Francesco was transferred in 1738 to the high altar; it underwent a radical transformation with the addition in 1743-44 of the two angels flanking the saint, the work of Giuseppe Frascari, made to a design by A. Masucci. If the two angels are eliminated, the baroque characters of the group and the statue disappear. St. Francis is perfectly in line with the rest of Diego's production and indeed appears very similar to the one sculpted in the previous decade in Naples.

The two Roman works, up to now the last known in the artist's activity, do not denounce any stylistic evolution of the Baroque type; also in Rome and by now in the middle of the century Diego he remained faithful to his timid monastic art.

The sources vaguely mention his stay in Palermo before reaching the Sambuca convent, but the works performed in these places have not been identified. He died in the convent of Sambuca (Agrigento) on 15 August. 1661.

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