

Marco MARCHETTI (Faenza (?) 1528 - Faenza 1588)

Study for a Wall or Façade Decoration, with an Allegorical Figure of Fortune Flanked by Two Mythical Figures

Pen and brown ink and brown wash, over traces of an underdrawing in black chalk.

Laid down.

Inscribed *Di Bernardino Poccetti* at the lower left, and further inscribed *p.r.* in the lower left margin.

Inscribed *31.6.s* on the backing sheet.

165 x 211 mm. (6 1/2 x 8 3/8 in.)

As Giorgio Vasari writes, in the 1568 edition of his Lives, '*But most rare among the other men of Romagna, in certain respects, is Marco da Faenza (for only so, and not otherwise, is he called), for the reason that he has no ordinary mastery in the work of fresco, being bold, resolute, and of a terrible force, and particularly in the manner and practice of making grotesques, in which he has no equal at the present day, nor one who even approaches his perfection. His works may be found throughout all Rome; and in Florence there is by his hand the greater part of the ornaments of twenty different rooms that are in the Ducal Palace, and the friezes of the ceiling in the Great Hall of that Palace…not to mention that the decorations of the principal court of the same Palace, made in a short time for the coming of Queen Joanna, were executed in great part by the same man. And this must be enough of Marco, he being still alive and in the flower of his growth and activity.*'

More recently, Rhoda Eitel-Porter has noted that '*The term grotesque describes painted or drawn decorations composed of small, loosely connected motifs, including fruit and foliage, architectural elements, whimsical human figures, and fantastic beasts. It originated from the Italian word grotte, or "caves", referring to the subterranean Golden House of Nero in Rome, where ancient Roman wall hangings and stuccos with similar fanciful designs were discovered during the late fifteenth century. The decorations were soon much in vogue. They typically accompanied larger narrative scenes, such as in Raphael's Logge in the Vatican Palace…Grotesque decorations abound in Palazzo Vecchio, and it is almost impossible to pinpoint Marchetti's exact contribution to various schemes. From his numerous drawings of this subject, however, it becomes clear that the most inventive motifs and those that are most convincingly three-dimensional in appearance are likely by his hand. Each*

painted figure, as well as the general architectural framework, has a convincing plasticity not apparent in the work of lesser masters.'

The two female figures flanking the figure of Fortune in this drawing may represent Melusine, a figure from European folklore with the torso of a woman and the lower body of a serpent or fish, who is sometimes (as here) also depicted with wings. The legend of Melusine, a female spirit of fresh water often associated with a holy well or river, is very rarely found in Italian art, however, though it was much more common in medieval literature in France and Germany. Very similar figures are found in a drawing for a mural decoration by Marco da Faenza that was formerly in the collection of Pierre de Charmant and was sold at auction in Paris in 2002.

Among other comparable drawings for wall decorations by Marco da Faenza are sheets in the collections of the Princeton University Art Museum in New Jersey, the Uffizi in Florence and the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge.

Artist description:

Marco Marchetti, known as Marco da Faenza after his birthplace, is best known as a designer and painter of grotesque decorations. The early years of his career were spent mainly in Rome, where around 1553 he decorated some of the rooms of the Palazzo Ricci Sacchetti. Giorgio Vasari writes that he was in great demand as a painter of grottesche, and praises his work very highly, as did the later biographer Giovanni Baglione, who described the artist as a 'gran maestro' in the field of decorative painting. By the mid-1550s Marchetti was working in Florence, where he executed an extensive series of grotesque decorations and ceiling paintings in the rooms of the Palazzo Vecchio, under the supervision of Vasari. The decorative grottesche of the rooms of the Quartiere degli Elementi in the Palazzo Vecchio are perhaps the finest manifestation of Marchetti's work in this field. After a period in Rome, the artist returned to Florence to work with Vasari between 1564 and 1566 on the apparati to celebrate the marriage of Francesco de' Medici, and was elected to the Florentine Accademia in October 1565. After some time working in Faenza and Rimini, Marchetti spent the latter part of his career in Rome, where one of his most important commissions was for the grottesche decoration of the Vatican Logge of Pope Gregory XIII, which he took over after the death of Lorenzo Sabatini in 1576. He was also active as a painter of religious subjects, including a series of paintings in the cloister of SS. Trinità dei Monti in Rome. Near the end of his life Marchetti seems to have settled in his native town of Faenza, where he worked on the decoration of the palace of the Cardinal Legate and in 1585 painted scenes from the life of Saint Francis for the monastery of the Osservanti.

Drawings by Marchetti are relatively scarce and, as they can only rarely be connected with known works, are often difficult to date. The largest number of drawings by Marchetti is in the collection of the Uffizi in Florence, while a small but significant group is in the Louvre in Paris.