

1.

Corbel depicting the head of a young man

PUPIL OF JACOPINO DA TRADATE

Candoglia marble, 18 x 18.5 x 17.5 cm

ca. 1410-1420

This head of a beardless adolescent with a slightly short-sighted gaze, crowned with thick curly hair (perhaps an angel or a deacon), was created to shape a corbel or bracket. Its design and execution are thus connected to an architectural context, and we should imagine that the boy's head once supported one end of an arch or a rib in a ribbed vault¹. This explains the patch of rough and uneven surface now visible on the skull, where the architectural element supported by the corbel once rested. Given the small size of the sculpture, the arch or vault that sprang from it must also have been of limited size.

The state of conservation indicates long exposure to the air, sun and rain, explaining the general weathering of the surface and the abrasions. It is also worth noting a gap in the hair, over the forehead, and a chip at the end of the nose.

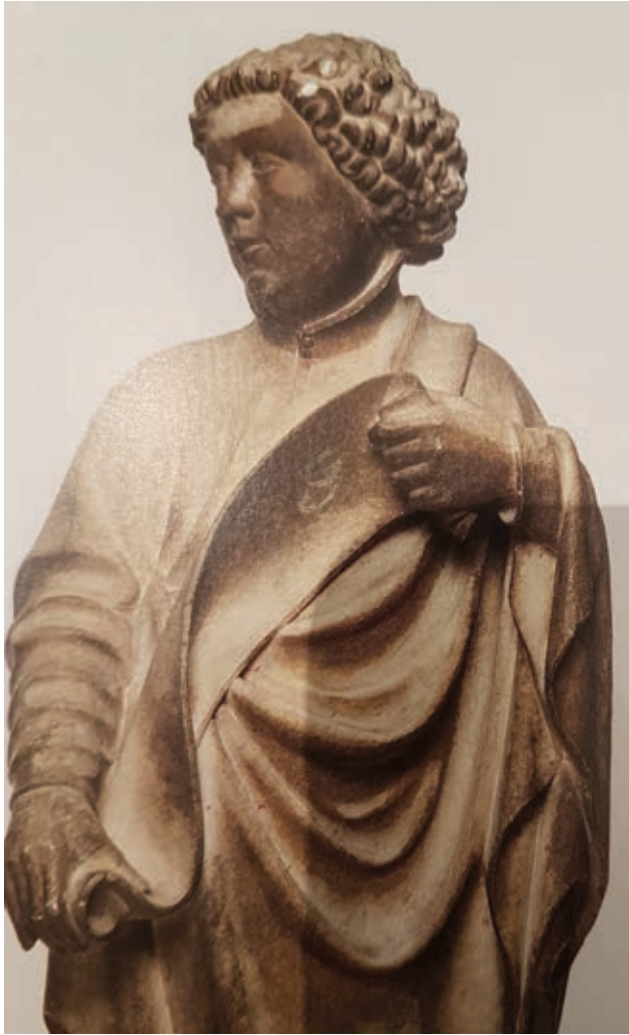
The rosy colour of the material from which the sculpture is carved, with visible dark veining, and its coarse-grained texture allow us to identify the area where it was quarried in the mountains surrounding the Lombard lakes, between present-day Lombardy, Piedmont and Canton Ticino. More precisely, the specific shade of colour of our figure corresponds perfectly to the marble used to construct and decorate Milan Cathedral, quarried in the vicinity of Candoglia at the entrance to the Val d'Ossola, in a bed whose exploitation was granted exclusively to the Veneranda Fabbrica del Duomo by Gian Galeazzo Visconti on 24 October 1387. For centuries, the marble continued to be transported to Milan from Candoglia by water for the exclusive use of the cathedral worksite.

However, it is certainly not just the type of marble that connects this sculpture with the worksite for the Duomo of Milan.

The courtly style of the representation, the young man's gentle and dreamy demeanour, his fine features stylized in a graphic and fluid manner, the rendering of the curly hair as a dense mass of corkscrew locks, are fully in keeping with the sculptural production of a specific period in the history of the carved decorations of the Cathedral: the early decades of the 15th century when the team of sculptors was directed by the great Jacopino da Tradate. The vacuum left by

¹ The head, from an Italian private collection, was put on sale in Genoa at the Cambi auction house on 19 May 2015.





Pupil of Jacopino da Tradate, *Young Prophet*,
Milan, Museo del Duomo

the death of Giovannino de Grassi (1398), who had overseen the worksite for a decade, sharing the design and decoration work with his colleague Giacomo da Campione (who also died in 1398), was filled by engaging a company of masters from Paris, among whom the prominent figures were the architect Jean Mignot, the painter Jacques Coene and the sculptor Roland de Banille. These French artists, who must at the time have been true international celebrities, introduced the style and trends in vogue on the other side of the Alps to the capital of the new Visconti Duchy. They thus effectively ushered in the final phase of Lombard Gothic, with its sophisticated grace, pleasant and joyous tone, slow and fluid rhythms. This was a language antithetical to the expressive verve, the tense and incisive linearity, and the pointed angularity of the period of Giovannino and Giacomo².

The arrival of the French artists, with their new mellowness in the international style, left an indelible mark on the new generation of Lombard artists who began to work at the

² On this transition see Laura Cavazzini, *Il crepuscolo della scultura medievale in Lombardia*, Florence 2004, pp. 39-43.





Lombard sculptors, Corbels, Milan, Duomo

Duomo worksite in these years. This is true particularly of Jacopino da Tradate, who adopted and amplified their style, developing already in the early years of the new century a highly distinctive formal approach destined to influence the sculptural production of the Cathedral worksite (and others) for decades to come. His style was characterized by slow and composed linear flourishes, a rhythmical symmetry in the execution of the drapery, a lucid and polished treatment of marble that found its most spectacular application in the colossal portrait of Pope Martin V, executed between 1418 and 1420 and placed inside the Cathedral, in the apse, near the entrance to the south sacristy, or in the statue portraying *St Babylas*, formerly outside the building on one of the buttresses and now in the Museo del Duomo (inv. ST44)³. Jacopino's manner, combining tenderness and elegance, lends itself to close comparison with the style of contemporary Lombard painting, dominated by Michelino da Besozzo, and goldsmithery, which saw the predominance of the sophisticated Beltramino de Zutti.

Though Jacopino da Tradate had attained a leading role in the worksite by 1407 and was effectively head of the team of stonecutters, his position was only officially confirmed in 1415, when the sculptor signed a contract offering unusually generous terms. In addition to a substantial salary, he was guaranteed a position for life (a prerogative of which he did not take advantage). His various duties also included training young apprentices in the art of sculpture⁴. In part thanks to this subclause, the normative power of his masterpieces persisted for an extraordinarily long time within the worksite. He had a very large number of pupils, followers

³ Anne Markham Schulz, *Matteo Raverti and Jacopino da Tradate*, in "The Burlington Magazine", CLIV, 2012, 1316, pp. 756-761.

⁴ Ambrogio Nava, *Memorie e documenti storici del Duomo di Milano*, Milan 1854, p. 182; *Annali della Fabbrica del Duomo di Milano*, 7 vols, Milan 1877 -1885, II, pp. 14-15.



Lombard sculptors, Corbels, Milan, Duomo

and imitators, and it is among them that we should seek the author of the head of a young man under discussion here⁵. The voluminous hair and childlike features, alongside the contrite expression underlined by the small mouth with narrow, closed lips, have as their reference model the figures created by Jacopino's scalpel and as their nearest relatives the works of his many followers busy on the Duomo worksite. Our elegant young man, whose seraphic head emerges from a charming lace collar, is clearly reminiscent of some statuettes now in the Museo del Duomo but originally from inside the cathedral. They include the figure of a young *Prophet*⁶ (inv. no. ST107), also framed by thick, curly hair, wearing an elegant *oppelanda*, the outer-garment most in vogue for both men and women in the early 15th century.

Again in the Museo del Duomo are other pieces that resemble our sculpture, in terms of size and typology more than style. These are a series of small protomes, with animal and human heads, from the exterior of the Cathedral (inv. nos ST24, ST25, ST26, ST27, ST28, ST30). They were sculpted in the early decades of construction work on the building (begun in 1386) to decorate the series of small corbels supporting the long series of three-lobed arches running around the perimeter, separating the high socle from the base.⁷ They are now inside the museum because they were ruined over time by exposure to the open air or accidental damage and therefore replaced with copies during the ceaseless progress of the *Fabbrica*, never truly 'finished'⁸. Like our sculpture, they were made from small roughly cubic marble blocks and were designed to project orthogonally from the wall face. Obviously, they are all in Candoglia marble. But it is walking around the Duomo, where there are still hundreds of original corbels

⁵ On the legacy of Jacopino da Tradate in Lombard sculpture see Laura Cavazzini, *Dal Tre al Quattrocento*, in *Milano. Museo e tesoro del Duomo*, Milan 2017, pp. 36-41, esp. pp. 40-41.

⁶ Matteo Facchi, no. 102, in *Museo e tesoro del Duomo. Catalogo generale*, Milan 2017, pp. 194-195.

⁷ Ugo Nebbia, *La scultura nel Duomo di Milano*, Milan 1908, pp. 242-258. As communicated to me by Marco Brun, the connection between the work under consideration here and the cycle of corbels for the Duomo was also suggested by Susanna Zanuso.

⁸ *Milano. Museo e Tesoro del Duomo* cit., nos 45-52, pp. 157-159.



Modern copy of the Corbel depicting the head of a young man, Milan, Duomo



still in their place⁹ (over 800!), that we find head-corbels particularly similar to ours, in stylistic terms as well, particularly at the crossings between the aisles and the arms of the transept.

This vast cycle seems to have been entrusted entirely to the imagination of the sculptors who succeeded one another at the Fabbrica and does not adhere to any coherent iconographical project: male and female faces, whole crouching figures, animals, monsters, skulls, flowers and leaves follow one another with great imaginative flair and in an entirely unpredictable way. What does form a narrative sequence, so to speak, is the style of these sculptures, starting from those of the 14th century on the first portions of the elevation (the sacristies and apse) and the more sophisticated pieces carved at the end of the Gothic period. After these we find the angular chipped figures of the Lombard Renaissance and then the works that signal in their openly stated classicism their belonging to the period of Lombard sculpture represented by figures such as Bambaia or Cristoforo Solari, and finally the unmistakably Baroque pieces. In short, we could say that the cycle of corbels, hitherto little studied, forms a sort of clock, marking with its stylistic shifts the passing of the decades at this grandiose

⁹ For a description of the whole cycle see Nebbia 1908, pp. 240-258 (with numerous illustrations).

worksite. Its function as a marker is in some ways comparable to that of another genre of architectural sculpture, the keystones, though the corbels are far more abundant. It is worth saying that this clock has never really stopped, as the worksite is still in progress today. Thanks to the enormous efforts expended during the 19th century, the decoration of the façade was finally completed, filling the external brackets and the empty niches of the interior capitals and erecting the forest of spires at the top. However, over the centuries localized interventions have never ceased, to restore, add, replace or adapt this great architectural mechanism to new religious requirements. Thus, for example, in 1613 the need to resolve once and for all the problem of the doors at the ends of the transepts – walled up by Carlo Borromeo to prevent the inhabitants of Milan from going to and fro to the market – alongside the need to provide an appropriate setting for the new altar dedicated to the *Madonna of the Tree*, in the north transept, led those in charge of the worksite to demolish (and then rebuild) a significant portion of wall. For this commission – to a project by the architect Francesco Maria Richino – the tried and tested competitive bidding method was used (what we would now call a tender process)¹⁰. The tender was won by Cesare Bossi, whose tasks also included “executing the little arches and the mouldings above” in uniformity (this was the demand of the patrons) “with the order running around the Duomo”. In other words, he was to remake the small arches and the brackets supporting them, adhering as far as possible to the medieval model. He was paid by the piece (so much per metre) and the contract explicitly stated that marble from the demolition, including the decorated and figurative parts, could be reused but equally explicitly warned that in this case deductions would be made. In other words, Cesare Bossi would not have benefitted from doing so. And indeed in these portions of wall we now see 17th-century corbels in a vaguely Neogothic style that seem to interrupt the stylistic clock of the worksite, so accurate in its movement from the apse towards the façade.

We can say with certainty that the head of a young man under discussion here was originally a corbel from the cathedral. Among the numerous reliefs in this series, one is virtually identical to this work, of which it is a faithful copy though it lacks the damage suffered by the original. The copy (essentially faithful though fairly free and somewhat uninspired in terms of quality) was evidently executed when the original corbel was removed from its place, during one of the many restoration and maintenance projects undertaken in this centuries-long building process. I know of the copy only through a photograph¹¹ and have unfortunately been unable to find its exact location: the outside of the Cathedral is currently concealed in several places not just by conservation scaffolding but by the numerous other large structures built against the outer walls. Erected to manage tourist flows or to repair the sculptures while the new Museo del Duomo was being set up – and thus originally intended to be temporary – these have effectively turned into permanent fixtures.

¹⁰ *Annali* cit., Appendices, II, 1885, pp. 114-115.

¹¹ Wikimedia, G. Dallorto.

The Apse of the Duomo of Milan



Considering the stylistic history of the worksite and especially of the series of corbels, this head of a young man must originally have been placed in the last span of one of the side aisles, at the point where the perimeter of the Duomo turns at the intersection with the transept. A series of clues suggest that the work was on the south side (on the right facing the façade). It is difficult to determine when it was replaced because, as we have said, the constant work to monitor and repair the facing of the Duomo has never ceased over the centuries.

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