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'La Maggior Porcheria Del Mondo': Documents for Ammannati's Neptune Fountain

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Abstract
The story of the creation of the Neptune Fountain on the Piazza della Signoria in Florence is long and tortuous. Scholars have drawn on a wealth of documentary material regarding the competition for the commission, the various phases of the fountain's construction, and the critical reception of its colossus, both political and aesthetic. A collection of unpublished letters at the Getty Research Center in Los Angeles offers a new perspective on the making of this major public monument. Sent by Bartolomeo Ammannati to the provveditore of Pisa, they chronicle the artist's involvement in the procurement and transportation of marble from Carrara and Seravezza for the chariot and basin of the fountain during the years 1565-73. The correspondence, excerpts from which are published here, shows that Ammannati faced numerous delays and mishaps, and continual pressure from his patrons during this second phase of the fountain's construction. The letters provide further insight into the personality of one of the most important artists at the court of Duke Cosimo I, whose role required the skills of a project manager and negotiator. The commission for a grandiose fountain in Florence's main square took much longer to complete than had been expected and taxed the artist's patience, persistence and resourcefulness. [excerpt]
'La maggior porcheria del mondo': documents for Ammannati’s Neptune Fountain

by FELICIA M. ELSE, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg

THE STORY of the creation of the Neptune Fountain on the Piazza della Signoria in Florence (Fig.43) is long and tortuous. Scholars have drawn on a wealth of documentary material regarding the competition for the commission, the various phases of the fountain’s construction, and the critical reception of its colossus, both political and aesthetic.¹ A collection of unpublished letters at the Getty Research Center in Los Angeles offers a new perspective on the making of this major public monument.² Sent by Bartolomeo Ammannati to the proveditore of Pisa, they chronicle the artist’s involvement in the procurement and transportation of marble from Carrara and Seravezza for the chariot and basin of the fountain during the years 1565–73.³ The correspondence, excerpts from which are published here, shows that Ammannati faced numerous delays and mishaps, and continual pressure from his patrons during this second phase of the fountain’s construction.⁴ The letters provide further insight into the personality of one of the most important artists at the court of Duke Cosimo I, whose role required the skills of a project manager and negotiator.⁵ The commission for a grandiose fountain in Florence’s main square took much longer to complete than had been expected and taxed the artist’s patience, persistence and resourcefulness.

The letters relate to one of the most important of Duke Cosimo’s projects: the reopening of the quarry at Seravezza and the expansion of facilities there for quarrying and transporting marble. The discovery of the richly coloured marmo mischio in the mountains near Seravezza around 1563 was attributed by Giorgio Vasari to Cosimo himself, and the purplish stone was incorporated into prominent works of art and architecture throughout Florence.⁶ For example, mischio corbels and footstools decorate the choir and statuary tabernacles in the cathedral; a sarcophagus of mischio adorns Michelangelo’s tomb in S. Croce; there are mischio niches, doorposts and altarpieces in the Palazzo Vecchio and Palazzo Pitti; and two massive columns of mischio were quarried, one set up in Piazza S. Felice and another planned for Piazza S. Marco. As the head architect responsible for a number of building projects, Ammannati kept track of nearly all facets of the quarrying operation, such as the sizes and availability of barge, wages for staff, supplies of rope and fees for carts and mules.⁷ For the construction of the Neptune Fountain, the availability of stone from Seravezza came not a moment too soon, and Ammannati decided to use a mixture of marbles from the area, bianco and mischio for the magnificent four-horse chariot and octagonal basin (Figs.44 and 45).⁸ To obtain the marble, as well as for that by his many other commissions, he sent a host of drawings, models and written instructions from Florence to the proveditori at Pisa, Francesco Busini and Giovanni Caccini, who, from that navigational hub,

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³ The letters concern a number of Ammannati’s architectural projects in Florence including the column in Piazza S. Trinita and the remodelling of the Pitti Palace.

⁴ On the chariot and basin, see Else, op. cit. (note 1), pp.111–66.

⁵ Heikamp likens Ammannati to Vasari; both were in charge of a number of projects that were worked on simultaneously and relied on organised workshops to complete them; see Heikamp, op. cit. (note 1), p.21.


⁸ Ammannati had already begun work on the colossal statue of Neptune and some of the bronze after he obtained the commission in 1560; see Uzz 173, op. cit. (note 1), pp.205–300. It remains unclear whether Ammannati changed the design of the fountain when it was decided to use Seravezzan marbles. For a discussion of the marmo mischio basin and the interplay of water, see Campbell, op. cit. (note 1), pp.124–26; and Heikamp, op. cit. (note 1), pp.21–24.

monitored supplies, transportation and the shipment of stone blocks arriving from Seravezza and departing for Florence. Even in writing instructions, Ammannati employed the help of others, some letters being written by an assistant, Benedetto Giramonti.19

The letters sent to Pisa during 1565 show Ammannati anxious to take delivery of the large blocks for the horses on the fountain, one from Carrara and two from Seravezza. These pieces, identified in the letters as the 'cavioli di marmo', would have been specially prepared and blocked out at the quarry to make them as light as possible for transportation and, as was common practice, would have been given final sculpted form by, or under the direct guidance of, the artist himself on their arrival in Florence. The pressure was on, as the ceremonial entry into Florence of Joanna of Austria, Francesco de' Medici's Habsburg bride-to-be, was to take place on 16th December of that year and, despite the fact that only a part of the work was finished, Ammannati's Neptune Fountain was intended to be a major spectacle on the route of the procession.20 In a letter dated 16th June 1565, Giramonti instructs Busini to send 'il marmo del cavallo . . . quando tinnovassi aqua', referring to the water level of the Arno, which needed to be sufficiently deep for the blocks to be transported safely.21 By October, the piece had still not been sent to Florence, and newly quarried blocks of micio for the two horses were awaiting transportation from the marina near Seravezza. On 11th October Ammannati wrote to Busini ordering that a boat ('scafa') be sent to Seravezza 'to convey the marbles for the horses for the fountain of the Piazza' and that the provveditore should send him 'that piece of marble in Pisa for that horse', for which he would prepare the roads for transportation by cart to Florence as well as having ready the appropriate payments.22 By this time, the statuary elements of the centrepiece, Neptune surrounded by tritons, had been set up in the centre of the fountain, and Ammannati might have hoped to add the magnificent stone horses in time for Joanna of Austria's arrival.23 However, the marble for the horses failed to appear before the unveiling of the fountain on 10th December.24 Nine days earlier, Ammannati had sent a letter to Busini begging him to send the needed materials by boat, declaring that 'His Most Illustrous Excellency desires that the fountain be brought to finish' and beseeching him 'to make every effort to send the materials as soon as possible'.25 In the end, the entrata was a success, and, as descriptions of the event indicate, Ammannati brought to a satisfactory, if temporary, state of completion the chariot and its four horses as well as the basin decorated with subsidiary figures and marine motifs. The foundations of the fountain, the aqueduct pipes and the colossal Neptune had been completed, and payment records reveal the presence of one marble horse and two bronze, one of which was identified as a satyr. The missing components of the fountain, including at least three horses and ten figures, were made of stucco painted to resemble cast bronze, while decorations on the exterior of the chariot and fountain were temporarily made of stucco and the cement basin was painted to imitate coloured marble.26

The solution was indeed temporary, as Ammannati made clear in subsequent letters to Busini. On 23rd March 1566 (stile nuovo), after writing three letters asking for news of the 'marmo per il cavallo', he stressed that he was under pressure from his patrons to finish the work, since the parts of the fountain made of stucco were liable to deteriorate.27 In May, the artist again requested that Busini send whatever materials he could when the water levels allowed it and that his efforts would be 'pleasing to His Illustrous Excellency because he desires that I get to work because those [portions] that are of stucco are deteriorating'.28 The deterioration was indeed noticeable – Agostino Lapini recorded that just a few months after the fountain's temporary unveiling, the stucco figures were completely ruined and had become a mess.29 For Ammannati, such an exhibition could not have come at a worse moment. In the wake of the competition for this prestigious commission, his work was under close scrutiny: his embittered rival Benvenuto Cellini wrote malign things about his expenses, and Giorgio Vasari, the friend who had supported Ammannati in the contest to take on the Neptune Fountain, gave the colossal a decidedly lukewarm evaluation, choosing not to remark upon the statue since the fountain was not yet finished.30 The sight of Neptune's world crumbling below him was far from pleasant.

8 On the provveditori, often translated as 'purveyors of works', see R. Goldhwait: 'The Building of Renaissance Florence. An Economic and Social History, Baltimore and London 1980, pp.159-62. Ammannati would have also sent materials to the provveditori at Pietrasanta, who was Matteo Inghirami from 1565 to 1571 and Giovvan Battista Carnesecchi from 1571 to 1582. Specific instructions or templates for marbles could be passed on to craftsmen such as Raffaello Cari di Serignano or, as will be discussed, sparcellini such as Mateo Starmazini; see Zhangerti, op. cit. (note 1), p.121; and Else, op. cit. (note 1), pp.114-20.

9 Little is known about Benedetto Giramonti, referred to as Ammannati's 'secretary and agent'; see Christie's 1997, p.18. In a letter dated 11th October 1568, Ammannati wrote to Duke Cosimo asking how much he could pay Benedetto and his brother Francesco for their services in the Pitti building project. Ammannati 'entrusted him [Benedetto] with the paperwork for the fountain' ('gli misi in mano le scritture della fontana') after the former had demanded more money; see V. Kirkham: 'Creative Partners: The Marriage of Laura Battifora and Bartolomeo Ammannati', Renaissance Quarterly 55, no.2 (2002), pp.530-31 and 544-47. This and other letters show Ammannati's concern with record-keeping; see Else, op. cit. (note 1), pp.116-17.

10 In a letter to Duke Cosimo of 3rd April 1565, Vincenzo Borghini includes the fountain as the thirteenth element of the entrata, remarking that 'Ammannati . . . as suoi giovani condurrà il gigante, che sarà bella e grande opera, e se gli avvensero tempo potè
But Ammannati stayed calm even in trying circumstances. From 1566 to 1567 a great deal of marmo mischio made its way to Florence, including the two blocks for the horses from Saravezza and various pieces for the fountain’s chariot and basin. Ammannati sent encouraging words to Busini: ‘I yet have faith in Your Lordship that each time one says to the Duke that so much mischio marble has arrived, His Excellency is greatly pleased.’ In other letters, directions were given to mark the different blocks according to their intended destination, with the blocks for the fountain to be marked with the letters P1; those for the Pitti, P2; for the column, C1; for the Cathedral, O1; for the Palazzo Vecchio, P3; and for the Magistrati (Uffizi), M1. Minor mishaps were inevitable; in one letter Ammannati beseeches Busini ‘fare diligentia’, pointing out that someone at the quarry had neglected to mark one of the blocks, and so the workers unloading the marble at the port did not know where it was supposed to go. The year before, there had been trouble from the bargemen. ‘Quosti barcaiali e navicellai’, Ammannati wrote, were bad because they made a scene, literally shrieking (‘strillono’) so that they could receive more than they deserved. Even worse, the artist continued, they were complaining to Busini in Pisa, giving excuses for not wanting to do what they were supposed to do, so that ‘all us ministers are set at cross purposes to such rabble’. He urged Busini to punish in the harshest manner the next person who wrongly complained, making clear the strength of feeling he had harboured against the workmen.

46. Detail of Fig. 43, showing the steps on the north side.

Ammannati’s troubles with the fountain were far from over. In the early 1570s, with much marble still to be delivered, one of the stonecutters at Pisa ruined the blocks for the zoglioli, the large steps surrounding the basin and probably also the surrounding platforms around the catchpools. These comprised a significant amount of
47. Letter written to Francesco Busini by Bartolomeo Ammannati, 15th June 1572. 28.5 by 21 cm. (Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles).

* The overall shape of the fountain is not a perfect octagon but, as contemporaries described it in 1565, comprised four major and four minor faces, terminating in eight angles, which Mellini likened to the *corni della pianta dell’abaco del capitello Cornizio, ma più spuntati dell’ordinario*; see Mellini, op. cit. (note 12), p. 111.

* On 4th February 1571, NS, Ammannati wrote to Busini, “e di V. S. son dire a quello scarpellino che fagi scaglioni per la fonte che ne mandi a altre navicelare e subito egli mandera dar”; on 10th February 1571, Ammannati wrote to Giovanni Caccini, “da la inclusa a quello scarpellino che fa gli scaglioni della fonte de la piazza e che seiquiti il faghi pischiati”; see BAL, 4th and 10th February 1570, FS. Examples of such templates by Michelangelo for the Library of S. Lorenzo include a number of scaglioni, in this case referring to baseboard mouldings and thresholds; see Wallace, op. cit. (note 9), pp. 165 and 173–75. Vasari refers to scaglioni in his staircase designs; see Gaye, op. cit. (note 7), pp. 48–51 and 53–55. Examples for other commissions by Ammannati of cornices and other architectural elements are repr. in M. Kiene: Bartolomeo Ammannati, Milan 1993, pp. 217–18 and 235.

* Se quello scarpellino … che fatto cosa nessuna di quello che aveva comincio di fare la mandi quanto prima”; ‘Il Serenissimo principe ma comesso che si rimetta mano per finire”; BAL, 19th April 1572. There is evidence that this scarpellino offered good value for his services; an undated fragment written in Ammannati’s hand states that ‘de gli scaglioni della fonte ne pararo a Francesco di Ser Jacopo. E gli è igevelato lo scarpellino perché ne fa bonissimo merato”; BAL, fragment no. 89A.

* Campbell provides a reconstruction of the fountain’s appearance with the higher walls at the time of the ennata of 1575; see Campbell, op. cit. (note 1), pp. 177–18 and 124.

* ‘Stiano a lavorare i Maestri senza eier revedi”; Settimmian, op. cit. (note 14), fol. 162v.

* Furthermore, the scarpellino had not made any of the decagioni that go with the quadrinorio, probably referring to the large catchpools placed along the proruding corner sections of the fountain. Ammannati writes: ‘V. S. sia astenita di mandare per lo scarpellino che tolse fegh gli scaglioni della fontana di piazza da Franceso di Ser Jacopo e deman-dagli che vol dire che egli non ceova quanto e ubigito e gli a fatto certi scaglioni scompagnati tui i diritti e quegli che andavano in arzo che sono 8 pezzi non a fatto nessuno lunghi 2½ bracci che in tuto sono 20 bracci e non a fatto quegli decagioni che vanno col quadrinorio per tore e cantoni sopra coda”; BAL, 10th May 1572.

* ‘Per beneficio de nostri padroni e di cotto poveretti”; ‘Non manchi di venire subito altri-

marble, all of which needed to be cut according to precise measurements (Fig.40). In February 1570, *stile fiorentino* (1571, *stile nuovo*), Ammannati sent Busini an enclosure (‘inclusa’) for Giovanni Caccini to give to ‘that mason who was making the steps for the fountain’, probably for a design from which to work. Over a year later, Ammannati demanded that ‘if that scarpellino … has done any of the work he was ordered to do, send it as soon as possible’. The artist was working under renewed pressure from his patron for, in the same letter, he told Busini not to send *marmo mischio* for the fountain because ‘His Serene Highness has ordered me to set about finishing it’. Also at that time, a drastic change was made in the design of the fountain basin. As Malcolm Campbell has pointed out, an entry for March 1572 in the diary of Francesco Settimmian records that the walls of the basin were to be lowered so that the water inside might be visible. Furthermore, a wooden fence was placed around the fountain so that ‘the Masters could work without being seen’, suggesting they needed privacy in the hustle and bustle of the Piazza della Signoria.

Ammannati was not at all pleased when he received the marble for the scaglioni. On 10th May 1572, he asked Caccini to send the scarpellino to Florence, writing that everything was the wrong length and that many of the scaglioni did not match one another (‘stom-pagnati’). Frustrated, he beseche’d ‘artistico’ Caccini to force the scarpellino in Pisa to come to Florence to see what he had done and to bring anything else he had worked on, ‘for the sake of our patrons and of this poor man’, that is, of Ammannati himself. The letter ended on a threatening note: the scarpellino should act immediately and take this business seriously. By the following month, Amman-nati had decided to take matters into his own hands in order to bring the scaglioni to completion. On 10th June 1572 he wrote to Busini about the bad work of the scarpellino, whom he identified as Mateo Starnazini, a workman from Carrara then living in Pisa. Starnazini’s work was ugly and badly done, Ammannati describing it as ‘una porcheria’. In conclusion, Ammannati and his workers were have-
ing to 'acomandando', finding other pieces of marble so that 'with sawing and splitting' most of the work could be done.15 However, he was not going to let the scarrellino off the hook, and told Busini that Starnazzi was to see Francesco di Ser Iacopo, who would get his hands on him ('gli fars dar delle mano adoso') and would write to the Pedistà.16

Within days, Starnazzi was in Florence, and Busini had sent an immediate response. Although the contents of Busini's letter are unknown, Ammannati's reply to him (15th June 1572) suggests that the provveditore may have reacted unpleasantly or fearfully, or both (Fig.47). Ammannati attempted to reassure Busini, writing that 'I know that you have a thousand reasons. In the end, you do well because you facilitate the works, and you do what it takes to have Their Highnesses get what they want.37 The artist pointed out that he himself had been exceedingly patient in trying to get things finished and that he had done all he could to satisfy his patrons and had kept quiet in order not to create difficulties:18

I beg you to be patient with what remains of the fountain so that I might bring it to completion to satisfy not just the patrons but all the nobility of Florence . . . If I had allowed indignation to carry me away, I would have made the greatest mess in the world . . . Come on, let's finish this because I am blowing off steam.39

This was the second time that Ammannati had used the term 'porchiera' in these letters.40 The word has far more negative connotations than the English word 'mess' and was commonly used to suggest a range of unpleasantities, including dung or excrement, literary works lacking in merit, actions of an ignoble or base character, and sexual and obscene practices.41 While it may be just coincidental, Lapini used the same word to describe the state of the fountain after the temporary materials had deteriorated.42

Ammannati was understandably anxious to finish the work properly since it was over twelve years since he had undertaken this important public commission under the scrutiny of his fellow artists and the Florentines. There was still a great deal of marble to be delivered, and archival records show that much of it was in fact sent that same year during June, July, August, November and December.43 The demands of his patrons and the pressure of time recur throughout Ammannati's letters, and he emphasises the importance of the fountain for 'tutta la nobilita di Firenze'. As the two letters of June 1572 show, he was required to resolve potential conflict both in a physical sense, in regard to the piecing together of new blocks for the fountain, and in the role of manager, by maintaining a good rapport with his administrators and by keeping the workmen in check. Two years later, on 23rd June 1574, the fountain, by then completed, with its four horses, splendid marble basin, ornate chariot and bronze statuary, was finally unveiled to the public, with only a few of the smaller pieces of marble still to be delivered.44 Yet, for all Ammannati's trouble, the seglioni of the fountain are barely noticed because, as Detlef Heikamp has pointed out, two of the three steps have been replaced by modern pietra serena.45

The survival of these letters allows us to reconstruct the history of this phase of the fountain's construction. Without them, one might never have known, looking at the splendid panoply of water, stone and bronze that constitutes the Neptune Fountain, that at times its construction resembled an unending series of 'porchiera'.

40 There are even a few payment records for March and May. In documents cited and transcribed by Cinelli and Vossilla, there are references to a 'Francesco di Vincenti Todeschi da Seravezza Scarrellino' being paid for work on the fountain; see Zangheri, op. cit. (note 1), pp.222 and 314, note 30; idem, op. cit. (note 7), p.626, note 15; Vasili Vatovec, op. cit. (note 7), pp.333 and 336, note 57; and Cinelli and Vossilla, op. cit. (note 1), pp.103–04.

Three portraits by John de Critz for the Merchant Taylors’ Company

by ROBERT TITTLER, Concordia University, Montreal

Comparison with the patronage for portraiture extended by individual leading liverymen, not to mention portraits of the court circle or the aristocracy, the London livery companies were surprisingly slow in the sixteenth century to commission easel portraits of their own leading members. Notwithstanding such works as Holbein's group portrait of Henry VIII granting the royal charter to the newly formed Company of Barber-Surgeons in 1540 (Barber-Surgeons’ Hall, London), only a trickle may be identified and dated with certainty before the last decade of that century, and not until about then did the practice become common among the leading companies. Yet from that time on it moved rapidly forwards. Companies not only commissioned portraits with increasing frequency but, by about the 1620s, they turned to the most fashionable 'picture-makers' of the day, such as Daniel Mytens1 and Cornelius Johnson,2 to portray their leading masters and benefactors, both living and deceased. To that list may now be added the name of John de Critz, three of whose portraits can be identified as having been commissioned by the Merchant Taylors' Company as early as the fiscal year 1606–07.

This that has not been discovered may by well be due to the confident assertion of the catalogue of the Merchant Taylors' pictures, Frederick M. Fry (Master of the Company in 1895–96), that no mention of the acquisition of these pictures had been found in the Company's records as catalogued by him in 1907.3 Yet a company account of 1606–07 records the payment of five pounds to 'John Decreete for making Sir Thomas Whites picture in a fayer lager frame' and another five pounds to 'Mr John Decreete for making the princes picture all anewe in the kings chamber and for Mr Dow his picture in a fayer frame'.4


2 Portrait of Sir Hugh Myddleton (1628) for the Goldsmiths' Company and a triple portrait of Thomas Babb, Clement Pangiter and William Peacock for the Painter-


4 London, Guildhall Library MS4148/9, Merchant Taylors’ Company Masters’ and Wardens’ Account Book no.9, microfilm frame no.916, accounts for 1606–07.

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