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

Felicia M. Else
Gettysburg College

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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 A collection of unpublished letters at the Getty Research Center in Los Angeles offers a new perspective on the making of this major public monument.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]

Keywords
Piazza della Signoria, Florence, Italy, Getty Research Center, Ammannati, Neptune Fountain

Disciplines
Art and Design | Fine Arts | History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology

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'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the fountain's construction, and the critical reception of its colossal, both political and aesthetic.1 A collection of unpublished letters at the Getty Research Center in Los Angeles offers a new perspective on the making of this major public monument.2 Sent by Bartolomeo Ammannati to the 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 1565-73.3 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 footings decorate the choir and statuary tabernacle in the cathedral; a sarcophagus of mischio adorns Michelangelo's tomb in S. Croce; there are mischio niches, doorposts and altari 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 barges, 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 that for his many other commissions, he sent a host of drawings, models and written instructions from Florence to the provveditori at Pisa, Francesco Busini and Giovanni Caccini, who, from that navigational hub, including the column in Piazza S. Trinita and the remodelling of the Pitti Palace.

1 On the chariot and basin, see Else, op. cit. (note 1), pp. 111-16.
2 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.
5 Ammannati had already begun work on the colossal statue of Neptune and some of the bronzes after he obtained the commission in 1560; see Utz 1973, 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. 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 ‘cavoli 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. In a letter dated 16th June 1565, Giramonti instructs Busini to send ‘il marmo del cavallo... quando rinnovassi acqua’, referring to the water level of the Arno, which needed to be sufficiently deep for the blocks to be transported safely. 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. 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. However, the marble for the horses failed to appear before the unveiling of the fountain on 10th December. Nine days earlier, Ammannati had sent a letter to Busini begging him to send the needed materials by boat, declaring that ‘His Most Illustrious Excellency desires that the fountain be brought to finish’ and beseeching him ‘to make every effort to send the materials as soon as possible’. In the end, the entrance 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 bronzes, 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.

The solution was indeed temporary, as Ammannati made clear in subsequent letters to Busini. On 23rd March 1566 (stile muro), 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. 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 Illustrious Excellency because he desires that I get to work because those [portions] that are of stucco are deteriorating’. 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. 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 obituaries of his expenses, and Giorgio Vasari, the friend who had supported Ammannati in the contest to take on the Neptune Fountain, gave the colossus a decidedly lukewarm evaluation, choosing not to remark upon the statue since the fountain was not yet finished. The sight of Neptune’s world crumbling below him was far from pleasant.

44. Detail of Fig.43.

45. Detail of Fig.41, showing the north-east corner.

* On the provveditori, often translated as ‘purveyor of works’, see R. Goldhwaite: 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 Giovanna Battista Carmanscini from 1571 to 1582. Specific instructions or templates for marbles could be passed on to carpenters such as Raffaello Carli di Serignano or, as will be discussed, scalpelli such as Mateo Starnamini; see Zangheri, op. cit. (note 1), p.121 and Else, op. cit. (note 1), pp.114-20.

[1] 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 scriture 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.

[2] In a letter to Duke Cosimo of 5th April 1565, Vincenzo Borghini includes the fountain as the thirteenth element of the entrata, remarking that ‘Ammannato... ar suoi giovani condurà il Gigante, che sarà bella e grande opera, e se gli avvenuto tempo potrò
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 Seravezza 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 P; those for the Piti; P for the column, C; for the Cathedral, O; for the Palazzo Vecchio, V; and for the Magistrati (Uffizi), M. 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. ‘Questi barcaiulli 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 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 stoneworkers at Pisa ruined the blocks for the zigoloni, the large steps surrounding the basin and probably also the surrounding platform around the catchpools. These comprised a significant amount of
THE overall shape of the fountain is not a perfect octagon but, as contemporaries described it in 1595, comprised four major and four minor faces, terminating in eight angles, which Mellini likened to the ‘corni della piana dell’abaco del capitello Cornizio, ma più spuntati dell’ordine’; see Mellini, op. cit. (note 19), p. 111.

On 4th February 1571, FS, Ammannati wrote to Busini, ‘e V. S. sono dire a quello scarpellino che faggl scaglioni per la fonte che ne mandi a altre navicelle e subito segli mandor danzanne;’ on 10th February 1571, Ammannati wrote to Giovanni Caccini, ‘da la inclusa a quello scarpellino che fa gli scaglioni della fonte da la piazza e che sequiti i faggl pisciani;’ 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 27), pp. 165 and 173–75. Vasari refers to scaglioni in his staircase designs; see Gaya, 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. Kienle: Bartolomeo Ammannati, Milan 1993, pp. 217–18 and 235.

Se quello scarpellino ... a fatto cosa nesuna di quello che aveva comessione di fare la mandi quanto primi; ‘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 its services; an undated fragment written in Ammannati’s hand states that ‘de gli scaglioni della fonte ne parlero a Francesco di Ser Iacopo e gli d’igaevole lo scarpellino perché ne fa bonissimo mercato;’ BAL, fragment no. 89A.

Campbell provides a reconstruction of the fountain’s appearance with the higher walls at the time of the enuata of 1595; see Campbell, op. cit. (note 1), pp. 117–18 and 134.

Stavano a lavorare i Maestri senza etre reduci; Settannisim, op. cit. (note 14), fol. 56v.

Furthermore, the scarpellino had not made any of the decastioni that go with the quadrinono, probably referring to the large catchpools placed along the protruding corner sections of the fountain. Ammannati writes: ‘V. S. sia contenta di mandare per lo scarpellino che tolse aper gli scaglioni della fontana di piazza da Francesco di Ser Iacopo e deman- dargli che vol dire che egli non essera quanto e ubbidito e gli a fatto certi scaglioni socomunati tui i diritti e quegli che andavano in arco che son 8 pesi non a fatto nesuna lunghi 2/8 braccia che in tuto sono 20 braccia e non a fatto quegli decastioni che vanno col quadrinono per fare e cantoni sopra cossade;’ BAL, 10th May 1572.

Per benevoli de nostri padroni e di cotto poveretti: ‘Non manchi di venire subito alti-"
ing to ‘acomandando’, finding other pieces of marble so that ‘with sawing and splitting’ most of the work could be done. However, he was not going to let the scarpeillo off the hook, and told Busini that Starnazini was to see Francesco di Ser Iacopo, who would get his hands on him (‘gli fana dar delle mano adosso’) and would write to the Podestà.  

Within days, Starnazini 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 proveditore 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.’ 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.

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.

This was the second time that Ammannati had used the term ‘porchiera’ in these letters. The word has far more negative connotations than the English word ‘mess’ and was commonly used to suggest a range of unpleasantries, including dung or excrement, literary works lacking in merit, actions of an ignoble or base character.

Archival documents show that in 1576, a ‘nichia di mesto’ had been delivered, and in 1579 a ‘nichia’ still remained at Pisa. On 29th May 1578, Ammannati referred to an aviso regarding the cargo (sole) paid for the fountain in a letter to Busini; see Zangheri, op. cit. (note 1), p.324, 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

compared 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 Mytens and Cornelius Johnson, 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 has not been discovered before may 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. Yet a company account of 1606–07 records the payment of five pounds to ‘John Decreete for making Sir Thomas Whittes picture in a fairer large frame’ and another five pounds to ‘Mr John DeCreefte for making the princes picture all anewe in the kings chamber and for Mr Dow his picture in a faier frame.’


4 London, Guildhall Library MS.4049/9, Merchant Taylors’ Company Masters’ and Wardens’ Account Book no.9, microfilm frame no.914, accounts for 1606–07.

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