

Over the decades, a sequence of events has marked the recovery of the Steri and its end use: in 1939 it was an art gallery, in 1958 it became the Congress Centre of the Regional Department of Tourism, in 1967, at the request of the Rector, Gerbasi, and by concession of the State Property administration, it was provisionally used as the rector's offices.

In subsequent years, there was restoration work, the study of Arab-Norman monuments and underground exploration, with the discovery of Arab columns and archaeological finds from the Middle Ages.

In 1970, with the Rector, D'Alessandro, work started on the Steri's recovery, renovation of its interior, and its final use as a rectorate, which included La Grutta's appointment as rector there in 1984.

With the final operational stage of the works, during Melisenda Giambertoni's (1984-99) rectorship, and its definitive completion, under the Rector, Gullotti, in 1999, an act to concede the state property complex of the Steri to the University of Palermo was stipulated.

It was this glimpse into the Steri's history, and its exceptional innate patrimony, with the stratification of events that have occurred over the centuries, which led to a first edition of the volume dedicated specifically to the ceiling of the Sala Magna – the Great Hall – published in 1975, followed by a new edition in 2006, entitled *Il soffitto della Sala Magna allo Steri di Palermo*, by the distinguished art historian, Ferdinando Bologna.

With this brief introduction, I would like to underline how this paper focuses on the most significant aspects of the Steri, which is of extraordinary importance for the city of Palermo, nationally and internationally.

In this regard, although already the object of attention and study by visitors and scholars, I also wish to highlight how the building described and presented in the Journal *Conservation Science in Cultural Heritage*, whose international scientific acclaim is undoubtedly well known, can increasingly become the object of further reading, interest and study.

However, there is another aspect I would like to underline, by turning your attention to the incidental and distinct backgrounds of the paper's authors characterized by the integration and synergy, from a scientific point of view, represented by the fact that they are technicians and historians, thus responding to the principles on which the Journal *Conservation Science in Cultural Heritage* has been based from its beginning and throughout the more than twenty years of its publication: interdisciplinarity and internationalization. This paper is a concrete example and an emblematic result in the way the Journal addresses issues in the field of culture.

It is with deep gratitude that I address my thanks to the Authors of this paper, also with respect to the message it conveys and for the role it will have for the University of Palermo, and for Sicilian, Italian and international society. On this point, I would like to take up the words used by the Rector, Silvestri, in his preface to Ferdinando Bologna's book, underlining the "... strong reference to culture and to the study of the past, to the love for culture, to the duty to preserve its sources and testimonies."

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THE STERI, THE HISTORICAL SITE OF PALERMO UNIVERSITY: PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

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1. Introduction

The exceptional importance of Ferdinando Bologna's volume "The ceiling of the Great Hall at the Steri of Palermo", published in 1975 and reprinted in 2002 for the celebration of the bicentenary of the institution of the University of Palermo, has found ample confirmation in the enthusiasm it aroused among the educated members of the public and specialists.

However, the scientific complexity of the study, its ample treatment of the subject and, almost exclusive circulation among the limited number of scholars on the subject, prompted the creation of an informative edition, which is no less accurate or rigorous, for the benefit of a wider, less specialised public, who is nonetheless interested in the innumerable cultural problems posed by the object of the research.

Thus, it is hoped there will be renewed interest in this work of extraordinary monumental and artistic value and that the city and the Region are reminded that, in addition to the many treasures they possess, this particular treasure, whose history spans more than six hundred years, is the history of Palermo itself.

2. The Steri, Palermo: historical note

About 650 years ago, in July 1380, the Chiaromonte family and specifically Manfredi III, at the height of his fortunes, completed the construction of the baronial palace, called the Steri¹ of Palermo. It was built near the sea, on the edge of the citadel of the Arab Emirs, and was a fortress rather than a home, a symbol of family pride, a family who felt they were the heirs of the authentic Sicilian spirit (Figure 1).

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Figure 1. Chiaromonte, Steri, Palermo (source: Wikipedia).

Eleven years later, the fate of the Chiaromonte family changed. In 1391, after Manfredi died, his successor, Andrea, was unable to stand up to the Aragonese army that landed in Sicily. As a result, King Martin took over Palermo, the Chiaromontes were defeated, and Andrea was beheaded in front of the palace built by Manfredi. In the following years, the Steri was gradually transformed into an Aragonese palace, and became the official residence of the Viceroy, the Tribunal for Property Assets, the Tribunal of the Inquisition, the seat of the Bourbon judicial offices and then, of the House of Savoy, until it was acquired by the University of Palermo. The University took possession of the Steri in 1967, while restoration work was underway. The work continued for several years, and in 1984, even before the restoration and preparation of the Sala Magna were completed fourteen years later, it became the seat of the rectorate.

Starting from its construction the Steri has undergone many alterations, which have disfigured several parts and compromised its complete restoration forever.

After the events of 1392, with the death of Andrea Chiaromonte, maintenance work was carried out in different parts of the building, in particular, on the painted ceiling of the *Sala Magna*, testifying to the fact that the building was still highly considered as a monument worthy of being preserved for the future, regardless of the political events of the day. Numerous examples of conservative interventions on works of art of a similar nature to that of the Steri are preserved in Andalusian Spain and in Sicily, such as the muqarnas ceiling of the Palatine Chapel located within the architectural complex of the Royal Palace in Palermo, and the wooden trussed roofs of the Cathedrals of Cefalù, Monreale and Palermo.

Such interest in keeping these painted ceilings in good condition, most of which were of Islamic tradition, leads us to think that there was a widespread awareness of their specificity and, consequently, a desire to save these artifacts whose historical-artistic singularity was evidently perceived. Between the end of the fifteenth century and just after the mid sixteenth century, many other works were carried out, but the characteristics of the ancient architecture of the building and its painted ceiling were no longer fully appreciated.

When, in 1601, the Steri became the seat of the Tribunal of the Inquisition and its meetings were held in the Sala Magna, the encouragement to learn more about the ceiling, through a new historical-artistic reading of the same, ceased, and a different criterion for evaluating the significance of the Steri's paintings was gradually established.

This is because the Sicilian Inquisition favoured local aristocrats more than elsewhere, as well as a type of historiography aimed at enhancing the role of the great noble houses in controlling the circulation of ideas and in establishing an education devoid of stimulating critical content; they were therefore interested in investigating the degree of nobility and antiquity that existed, through research on archaeological and aristocratic elements, to which the ceiling of the Steri lent itself very well.

2.1. Historiographic excursus

The above is evident in the work of Agostino Inveges [1] who, in 1651, re-explored it as a simple repository for material memories, transcribed the inscriptions with errors and arbitrary additions and, from the large number of coats of arms, obtained a heraldic map of Sicilian baronage. During the Enlightenment, unlike what happened in other European countries, Sicilian culture made no progress compared to the previous century, producing, as far as the Steri was concerned, mostly imprecise heraldic studies for figures and documentary repertoires of the nobility of the island, despite the fact that in Palermo, towards the middle of the eighteenth century, a certain artistic interest in medieval monuments began to gain ground.

In 1782, the Tribunal of the Inquisition abandoned the Steri, having been suppressed by royal decree after the arrival of the reformist viceroy, Domenico Caracciolo, in Sicily. This event, however, did not favour the artistic fortunes of the building and helped neither the conservation nor the appreciation of the painted ceiling, which was consequently left in a state of serious neglect. An attempt was made to hide the fact by installing a clumsy false ceiling. From a political point of view, however, a series of events culminated in the collapse of Bourbon power in 1860.

The situation of the Steri did not change under Savoy rule with Sicily's union to Italy. On the contrary, during the first decades it worsened, and it was not until 1898-99 that restoration of the ceiling was started. By that time, it appeared devastated, was partly covered, and had been damaged by rain and bad intervention work.

The restoration was a decisive moment in both the material recovery of the work and its critical history, as it was the result of a reflection whose background was represented by a strongly innovative European cultural thrust. The intervention was accompanied by studies and systematic research on the monument which intersected with those on the ceiling of the Palatine Chapel, leading to the recognition of an Islamizing continuity in subsequent Sicilian art. This allowed the ceilings of the Steri to no longer be considered merely archaeological artifacts to be used in the historic heraldry of the local baronage, but as evidence of the history of art, as in the case of the Islamic ceilings of the Palatine Chapel.

By highlighting the "applied" character and the "practical" nature of the Palermo ceilings, these studies, which denoted a European opening of Sicilian culture towards the Anglo-Saxon world in particular, made it possible to overcome the distinction between major and minor art and to affirm that fittings, such as painted ceilings, were as valuable for art history as were works of a monumental nature.

The pages published by Gioacchino Di Marzo [2-3], first in 1858 and then in 1899, represented a step forward of great importance because, in addition to enhancing the "charm" and "magnificence" of these special painted ceilings, he made a connection

between the ceiling of the Palatine Chapel and that of the Steri. This confirms that a taste for the Islamic prevails in both works, a taste that blends with Sicilian art for at least the following two centuries. He also highlights the extraordinary variety of the ornamental designs, largely deriving from the inexhaustible fantasy of arabesques with human and animal figures, in which Islamic art shines.

After examining the decorative elements, he moves on to the iconography of the “figurative subjects”, identifying several of them, at times accurately, at other times inaccurately, noting however that a systematic study of the complex would allow for a historical interpretation of the monument, also with regard to its relationship with society, of which it is an expression.

Finally, Di Marzo deals with the “field of art” and points to the Sicilian origin of the painters whose signatures he had identified: “Mastru Simuni di Curiglu[ni]” and “Mastro Chicu di Naro”, and giving an entirely Sicilian interpretation of their pictorial language; an erroneous interpretation, even if it must be recognized that a writer of the late nineteenth century could not possess the knowledge and criteria of judgment of the art historians of many years later.

However, Di Marzo had affirmed three fundamental points which would then be confirmed by subsequent historiography: the ceiling of the Sala Magna in the Steri is a work of undisputed primary importance for the history of art; its Islamic origin is similar to that of the ceiling of the Palatine Chapel; it contains a very rich and extremely interesting figurative cycle, whose subjects, in addition to representing a vast repertoire of late medieval Sicilian fables, constitute one of the most relevant examples of late European medieval iconography.

Subsequent studies added nothing new to knowledge of the work until the 1920s. It was Ettore Gabrici [4-7] and Ezio Levi [8-12] who later carried out interesting investigations by first concentrating on the iconographic explanation of the pictorial cycles and then including documentary research. This made it possible to have a clearer picture of the facts related to the events of the Palazzo Chiaromonte. They discovered that the ceiling painters were not two, but three (the third being “Pellegrino Darena” or “de Arena”); and finally, having subjected the work to a systematic historical-artistic investigation, they found some new indications that correlated the tradition of the Islamic origin of Sicilian painted ceilings and the one that had developed on the Iberian Peninsula towards the end of the fourteenth century.

Gabrici then carried out a careful analysis of the inscriptions, coats of arms and other decorative elements, believing that the most significant and original part of it was to be found in the decorations without figures. Furthermore, he identified the work of each of the three painters in the figurative cycles. However, his work did not give satisfactory results, even though, considering the methods and knowledge of the time, Gabrici had managed to summarily indicate the main decorative varieties employed in that context.

The inclusion of the Palermo ceiling in a broader cultural horizon is mainly due to the intervention of Ezio Levi, who not only brought numerous clarifications to the explanation of the stories of each representative cycle, he also maintained that the vast overall design of the work was the result of an “organic mind” and that “a true medieval encyclopaedia was condensed in the paintings on the beams”, namely, “the profane iconography of the Middle Ages”.

In successive years, no appreciable innovations were made in any studies concerning the historical-artistic and historical-cultural fields until the 1940 memoir by Vittorio Lanza [13] on 12th-17th century Sicilian ceilings. Although it was the most organic investigation conducted up to that moment, on that specific kind of artefact in Sicily, it contained numerous generalities, several errors, many uncertainties in the histori-

cal-artistic knowledge of the sectors examined and a radicalization of the continuity of the Sicilian spirit, which in turn, was incorporated into the myth of popular art.

It was not until Toesca [14], in 1950, that the ceiling paintings of the Steri were included in the broader context of Italian art. They were defined as “the most singular work of Sicilian painters”; characterized by “Islamic vestiges” and “Romanesque and Gothic ornamentation” following a “Gothic-like style made up of flat outlines and colours albeit derived through mediation from beyond the Alps”; they were similar to decorated ceilings in Spain, with references made to the illuminated illustrations of the codices that dealt with classical studies, chivalry, bestiaries and ornamentation.

After these insights, no other important scientific contributions appeared apart from that of 1956 by Gianfranco Folena [15], who defined the iconographic cycle of the Chiaromonte ceiling as a figurative summa of all the romance literature of the Middle Ages, until Toesca’s idea on the illustrated manuscripts was taken up again, a unique work in Romance culture, and one of the most original in fourteenth century Italy. Preparatory studies by Ettore Li Gotti [16] followed the same direction when he decided to document the pictorial cycle from scratch by photographing the ceiling with a view to systematically illustrating the paintings afresh. However, he died prematurely, and his project was taken up by Professor Giuseppe Cusimano.

Other studies of a historical-cultural nature also exist, such as the writing by Francesco Bruni [17] for whom the paintings on the ceiling of the Steri are an expression of courtly secularism linked to the world of feudalism.

2.2. The studies of Ferdinando Bologna

Today, the volume dedicated to the ceiling of the Sala Magna at the Steri in Palermo by Ferdinando Bologna [18], is of great importance. It was published in 1975, then re-edited in 2002 to celebrate the bicentenary of the establishment of the University of Palermo.

After an accurate historiographical analysis, Bologna’s work proposes, through a precise study program, to methodically and systematically address the Steri’s problems, which fundamentally relate to its historical-artistic aspects, its iconography and iconological interpretation, and its historical, social and ideological roots; but not without first dealing with the question of its traditionally Sicilian characteristics, in other words, the tendency to want to see everything as being Sicilian without considering any external elements, which frequently influenced them by mixing with local elements, and conversely, the juxtaposed question of the cultural isolation Sicily experienced during the fourteenth century and at other times in its history.

With a very open mind, he proposed to examine the facts and to analyse the ceiling, above all in consideration of the place it deserved in the history of the specific genre, both in Palermo, as well as throughout the Mediterranean area. Neither did he neglect the way in which the genre was suited to the type of decoration it was used for. He then analysed the non-figurative decorative systems and their origin, while for the figurative part, he specified its character and purpose, as well as the reason for its occasional rough approach, also attempting to establish which parts belonged to which master, each one successfully defining their figurative culture.

Considering that Bologna’s volume represents the broadest and most complete contribution to the knowledge of the Steri ceiling, the previously briefly mentioned salient points will be addressed in the following paragraphs along the lines of the study plan he proposed.

3. Historical-artistic aspects of the ceiling

The historical-artistic aspects include an examination of the ceiling's structure and pictorial genre, an analysis of the non-figurative and figurative decorations, identification of the authors, and the distribution of the work with regard to the execution of the various parts and, finally, an examination of the historical, social and ideological context.

3.1. *The structure and painting genre*

Having accurately described the painted surface and the structural texture of the ceiling, Ferdinando Bologna then dwells on how the choice of the warp with partitions and sub-partitions, and the large number of beams and their accentuated proximity were chosen for a special reason, related not only to the matter of the ornamentation, but above all to that of the narrative-didactic aspect, which then unfolded figuratively on the surface of the beams and inside the compartments they delimited. In other words, since the project envisaged an extraordinary decorative and iconographic richness right from the start, this program conditioned the design of the structure to the point of requiring the preparation of sections of the surfaces in such a number as to contain the full development of the narrative. This is an extremely significant observation, since it can be deduced that the Steri ceiling does not represent a simple renewal of traditions, it responds to a particular request and is therefore designed "ex novo", and consequently leads to familiar structural elements being translated into aesthetically new ones.

How the architect-carpenter of Manfredi III reached this result is widely investigated in the following pages.

Notwithstanding a continued taste for the Islamic style in certain Sicilian works produced between the 12th and 14th centuries, including the ceiling of the Palatine Chapel in Palermo, Bologna argues that they cannot have been directly derived from the prototype dating back to more than two centuries earlier; firstly, because in the world of Islamic art, which was also very conservative, significant transformations took place at that time, and secondly, because the manifestation of the forms offers no possibility of comparing the two ceilings, suggesting a more recent source for that of the Steri, which was differently localized, as well as being the expression of a more modern experience. Indeed, the ceiling of the Steri appears to bear a closer resemblance to Spanish mudejar ceilings², although the structure of the latter appear elementary compared with that of the Steri.

A careful examination of the architectural sources, typical of the Mediterranean area between Sicily, Spain and northern Africa, led Bologna to affirm that the Islamic world of northern Africa had had knowledge of some of the elements characteristic of the Chiaromontane ceilings since the 11th century and that it was clearly in that area that the principal architectural source was to be found. Furthermore, the ceiling in Palermo must certainly have been affected by the artistic events which characterized the Maghreb and the city of Granada between the end of the thirteenth century and the first half of the fourteenth century; events which eventually led to the construction of the famous Alhambra complex. The Alhambra immediately became a point of reference whose echo also reached Sicily and the court of Manfredi III Chiaromonte, as evidenced by the textual checks Bologna carried out and the numerous formal and structural comparisons, even though the expressive subtlety of the fourteenth century Hispano-Moorish sources is evidently superior when compared to the ceiling of the Steri.

One last interesting consideration that leads to highlighting how, in Sicily and in Christian Spain, both Islamic style ceilings and more specifically mudejar ones are found in sacred buildings, despite their decorations being of a profane nature. It was a trend that was commonly used, which started with the Palatine Chapel in Palermo until the fourteenth century and later, and stemmed from the particular secular tone of the Islamic vision. Such contrast, between the place of use and the intent of the decorative themes is completely missing in the ceiling of the Steri, where the architect uses an Islamic ceiling to cover a profane environment in a noble residence. The result must have appeared such an innovation that it soon became a model that conditioned not only private works of the same type, but also religious buildings, in Sicily.

3.2. *The aniconic decoration, the coats of arms and the writings*

As already mentioned, the decoration is of an extraordinary richness, both in the non-figurative sequences, characterized by vegetal and geometric themes, writings, coats of arms, and in the figurative sequences, where, moreover, by combining such diverse motifs, far from determining fragmented and contrasting results, they create an impression of singular unity and homogeneity.

If we then go on to investigate the various parts that make up the ornamental design, individually, we notice that the figurative part, and the non-figurative part which, though based on a great variety of expressions, are not of a very high quality, especially if observed closely. It is therefore difficult to make an evaluation of the artistic quality of the two parts, as if they were two separate antithetical entities. Indeed, that note of mediocrity that is perceived is in reality a characteristic, “a deliberate summary of the execution” determined by practical factors that required the work to be done rapidly and with cursive and ordinary connotations. Approximation, here, refers to the functional aspect of viewing from afar, from the right distance, thus mitigating any aesthetic limits by favouring an overall aesthetic vision. This justifies the “popular” interpretations given to the ceiling which, however, arose from the academic prejudice that a ceiling painter could not be an artist.

The repertoire of the afore-mentioned non-figurative or aniconic parts is vast: they include intertwining plant themes and foliage that combine with others of a graphic design (Figure 2), coats of arms of noble families and reigning dynasties, cities, states, popes and emperors – as Giovanni Travagliato has recently clarified [19] –, openwork rosettes, intertwining arches, triangles and other geometric figures, rich swirls of acanthus leaves, abstract elements and so on, with the significant evidence of a strong, though seemingly impossible relationship between the natural elements and abstract elements that are found, moreover, in all mature Islamic art.

A relationship which, however, weakens towards the final part of the ceiling, because the geometric character of the aniconic repertoire unexpectedly tends to prevail over the naturalistic one.

It is thus possible to identify two distinct aniconic experiences: the first characterized by a variety of directions, the second tending to be more homogeneous and oriented toward increasingly greater abstract simplification.

The next step is to define the cultural matrix of these two sectors.

There is little mention of it in the criticism that precedes Bologna's analysis. There are those who, like Gabrici [4-7], initially refer to Spanish mudejar ceilings and then underline their derivation from the mosaics of the ambos and floors of the Norman age in Sicily and, there are those who, like Lanza [13], dispute the analogies with mudejar art³ and confine their derivation to Sicily. Instead, according to Bologna [18], there is an

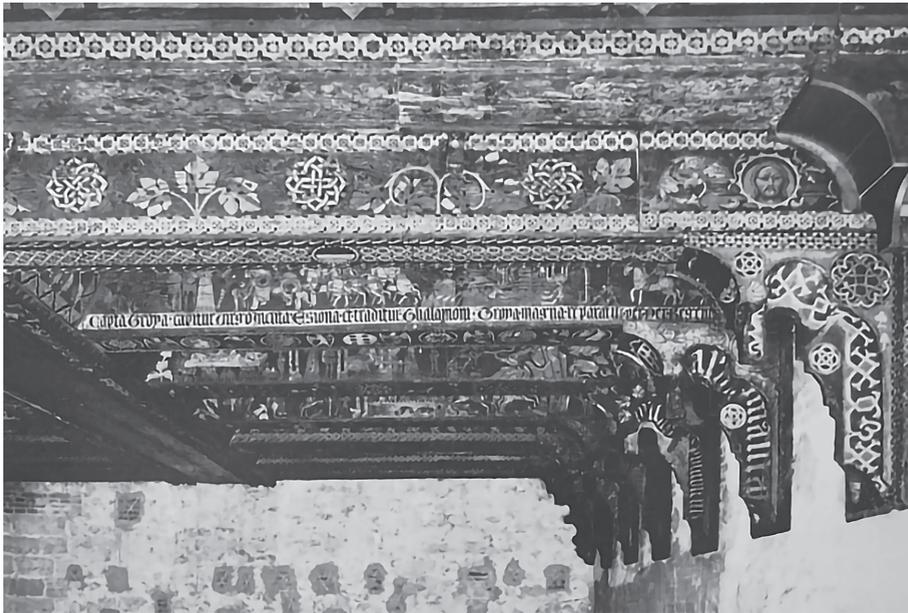


Figure 2. The central band shows three star motifs composed of a pattern of braided ribbon alongside a splay of vine leaves; on the right, a vegetal decoration with the face of Christ [18].

evident similarity between the decorations of the Steri and the Hispano-Moorish ones of the Spanish *artesonados* (ceilings), even if elements of other origin are involved and, in any case, the similarities between specific themes are never literal. Furthermore, in the first sector, something of the art of the Norman age can be seen, whereas for the pictorial-miniature character of the Chiaramonte ceiling, there is the mediation of an illuminated codex, while other elements suggest a western culture of gothic extraction and some of the interweaving has appreciable similarities with the decoration of a group of Islamic vases in damascened bronze, of Syro-Mesopotamian or Iranian origin, dating back to the second half of the 13th century and early 14th century, now dispersed in various collections. The second group of decorations appears more homogenous, and the Islamic element has a more direct role, which allows the precedents and the derivations to be precisely identified according to an underlying theme that progressively develops in the Persian world and moves towards more recent western Islamic circles, such as the Maghreb. Neither can the analogies with the decorations of the palatine ceiling in Palermo be ignored; their aniconic themes also belong to the Islamic art of the East, even if the themes in the Steri presuppose a much more advanced artistic stage, a stage that cannot be conceived as a simple local development, but mediated by the development of the schools of Persia, North Africa, Andalusia, whose work the Steri masters must have had first-hand knowledge of.

The coats of arms and inscriptions are part of the aniconic decoration which seventeenth and eighteenth-century authors, above all, wrote about, and later, Gabrici [4-7], who only made an accurate list, and merely observed that until then no systematic heraldic study had yet been carried out. Even today there is still no such study, which seems strange given that these coats of arms express a precise desire for noble self-celebration.

An earlier example, dating back to around 1300, which may constitute a model similar to the Chiaromontane one, was identified by Bologna. It is the *Salle aux écus* in the castle of Ravel near Clermont-Ferrand, where a frieze of forty-nine coats of arms of the most important families of France is painted. And yet, when one compares the importance of the Sicilian lineage with that of the kingdom of France, a quite exceptional fact is that the Palermo heraldic display brings together about eighty coats of arms of far superior quality and of a significantly higher number than the French.

As for the inscriptions, of which there are a considerable number, most are written in Latin, but there are also several in the vernacular. In particular, those bearing the signatures of the three painters are in the vernacular, and more precisely in Sicilian vernacular: *Mastru Simuni pinturi di Curiglu[ni]*, *Mastru Chicu pinturi di Naro* and *Mastru [P]illirinu Darenu pigituri de Palermu* (Figures 3-4).



Figure 3. Signature of Simone da Corleone [18].

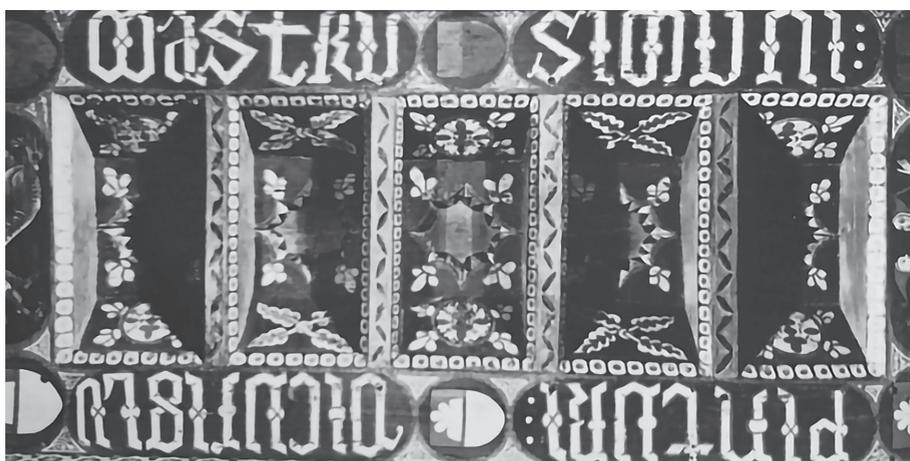


Figure 4. Signature of Cecco di Naro [18].

In the writings, the decorative purpose prevails over the expressive value of the words following an Arabizing influence that had arrived in the West, which is present, above all, in the epigraphic decorations of North African and Andalusian monuments.

Many of them appear in relation to profane scenes of a narrative nature and have an explanatory function, while others are of a sacred or moral nature and, for this reason, are isolated from the narrative context; others subvert the semantic-functional value of the alphabetic signs of the language to which they belonged, as if the Steri painters were looking for a different kind that was of an esoteric-kabalistic order, and thus addressed the semantic value of the letter with the presence of its image. Yet another sign of the adherence of the Steri painters to more recent Islamic art.

Nevertheless, there are Western implications that denote increasing participation in the new profane climate that was establishing itself in European art which, nonetheless, included an interest in oriental art.

3.3. *The figurative decoration*

Among the purely decorative elements is an equal abundance of figurative scenes, whose characteristics, from an historical-artistic point of view, are carefully examined by distinguishing the various stylistic units, matching them when possible, to the aniconic decoration, and identifying their underlying figurative culture.

Also in this case, previous critiques have left summary indications with few ideas and reliable contributions.

According to Gabrici [4-7] the non-figurative and figurative decorations were independent of each other. He indicated the first style, by the hand of Cecco da Naro, for most of the scenes on beam XI; a second hand, which was that of Darenò da Palermo, for the remainder; and a third hand, of greater artistic value, which was that of Simone da Corleone, because of the space separating the first signature and isolating it from the other two.

Levi, likewise, indicates [8-12], for all figurative parts of the ceiling, a strong link with the mudejar style of the Spanish *artesonados*. After these observations, no further studies were made regarding the difference between the Masters involved or the cultural characterization of the paintings, with the exception of those by Toesca [14], who was the only one to reaffirm the correct part of the Hispano-Moorish theses supported by the two authors who had preceded him; to define the “Gothic-like style made up of flat outlines and colours albeit derived through mediation from beyond the Alps”; to reaffirm the affinities with the decorated ceilings of Spain; to find a link with the paintings in the Patio of the Lions at the Alhambra, to be the first to highlight the miniaturist nature of the Chiaromontane paintings and, finally, to indicate the ideas that were to be further explored.

Bologna [18] did precisely this when he examined the paintings once more. First of all, he affirms that there are more than three homogeneous nuclei that can be clearly identified and, that the presence of the three signatures must not condition any judgment, as they most likely indicate groups of workers who belonged to one of the three masters. Secondly, he observes that in one of the sectors, there is a clearly distinct part that appears extraneous to all the rest, also for technical reasons, which is probably the result of restoration work dating to a later period, perhaps the intervention documented in 1438.

Given these premises, Bologna goes on to examine the various sectors, gradually identifying the different hands that worked on the painting. He accompanies each one

with a story, and dwells in particular on the group of painters led by the so-called Master of the “Judgment of Solomon”, who executed the figurative paintings which, using almost the same internal partitions, cover the first sector identified in the aniconic decoration with a very distinct stylistic direction and reflects the style of the Spanish *artesonados*. In this respect, the most meaningful reference for the Chiaromontane paintings is to the ceiling of the parish church in Vileña near Burgos, most probably painted shortly after the mid-fourteenth century by painters whose culture presents a marked Moorish component, especially in the decorative plant motifs.

The miniature elements have already been mentioned. Bologna deems it possible that the Master painter of the Solomon story knew of some Castilian illuminated codex on biblical or chivalric subjects dating back to the same figurative culture as the *artesonado* of Vileña. Similar cases could be the miniatures of the Spanish version of the Roman de Troie at the Escorial and the fourteenth-century miniatures of the Bolognese school, whose influence was endorsed by the constant relations involving university studies between Sicilian law scholars and Bologna. Nor can connections with Neapolitan miniatures be excluded. This hypothesis is confirmed by the fact that the Master painter’s first interventions are flanked by parts executed by other painters who, while moving within the sphere of the culture of Vileña, share direct affinities with both Emilian and Neapolitan art.

The first of these painters demonstrates remarkable artistic quality and, in fact, there are artists who copied his work. His painting makes us better appreciate his talent, which appears to be of a higher calibre than that of the Master painter of Solomon himself, with characteristics resembling those in Bolognese culture.

The second painter identifies with the author of other stories closer to the Neapolitan manner. An overall examination of all the formal, typological and cultural aspects observed so far, in the parts executed by the various masters, refer very precisely to models found in the pages of a notebook kept in the Morgan Library in New York, due to their grotesque and biting spirit, and the proposed topics in which curiosities prevail. Then there is the Master of the acanthus swirls, already indicated by Gabrici [4-7] in the “Giotto tradition”, whose physiognomy is undoubtedly Neapolitan, but looks to the branch of the Neapolitan miniature of Giotto inspiration.

A new direction is taken on the beams from XI to XXIV: a direction which corresponds to that highlighted in the non-figurative decorations of beams VI, VII, VIII. As for the latter, here too, the geometric motifs are accentuated, even if the presence of two different artists should be noted, they express architectural and landscape elements of a fairy-tale and almost lyrical tone for the most vibrant moments; another accentuates the elements bearing coats of arms, creating an even more fabulous overhead suspension, which spreads a light over the decorations giving it a glazed effect, whose general tone, even if the quality is not always excellent, is nonetheless high.

Its cultural provenance, however, is different from that of the other Masters, moving towards Andalusia and the northern coast of Maghreb Africa. In addition to this, it should be noted that the part attributable to this second Master shows evident links with a group of fourteenth century illuminated manuscripts from England, especially as regards the monstrous figures and the fighting between animals, even if, obviously, the Steri Master translates everything into his own Andalusian language using solid colours and no shadows. In conclusion, a further consideration concerns the influence exerted by the Steri’s paintings and its range of propagation which, if it was not what one might have expected, it, nonetheless, had numerous reflections as the prototype of a specific tradition which lasted until the middle of the 15th century, with notable in-

fluences even in the sumptuary⁴ and domestic arts, as demonstrated by some well-known quilted bed covers.

All this also demonstrates that the pictorial cycles of the Chiaromonte ceiling have nothing that can be described as popular, nor do they bear any similarity to Sicilian folk art, owing to the extreme complexity of the culture of reference that emerged, and the capacity it had for its diffusion.

Of course, the general tone of the representations suggests a somewhat dialectical version of the “illustrious” language, but there is a distinction between a dialect that reflects only a popular experience, and a dialect which instead, is based on refined material, as happens in the case of the Steri.

3.4. Identification of the authors and distribution of the work

Focusing on the issue of the authors' identity, the problem of the three signatures has yet to be clarified, but they seem to point to just three painters who produced the varied and enormous quantity of ceiling paintings. Starting from a topographical-palaeographic premise, Bologna hazards a guess, despite acknowledging the enormous difficulty of the question. His hypothesis essentially refers to two points: the first concerns the fact that the signatures of the three painters appear in unusual places, neither at the beginning nor at the end of the pictorial cycle, but in the middle and, while the signature of Simone da Corleone stands alone, the other two – Cecco di Naro and Pellegrino from Palermo – are next to each other; the second, however, refers, to the fact that different gothic fonts are used.

Starting from these observations, Bologna [18] first assumes that, since all three signatures appear after beam V, which is where the first sector ends, one could think that the work of the three painters was limited to the second sector. Besides, since Simone's signature is separate from the other two, his activity must have been limited to the area characterized by the frieze of interwoven star-shaped ribbons, which bears drawing features resembling those in the signature and, therefore, to the decorative elements connected to such friezes. Furthermore, Bologna believed that the creator of the entire decorative system was also the one who determined the character of the entire ceiling by creating the decorative frame which also includes the first sector, and by composing the module which was then continued beyond the XVIII beam up to the end, hypothesizing that this artist was responsible for the entire decorative-pictorial design as well as the project on which the architectural texture of the ceiling was based. This might be confirmed by the detached position of the signature placed precisely at the point where the ornamentation, to which the ceiling owes its character, is most ostentatiously defined.

This hypothesis consequently implies that the other two painters had a subordinate role. Of the two, the more inspired seems to be Cecco di Naro, while it is difficult to express plausible opinions on the role of Pellegrino da Palermo. One could at best hypothesize he was a figure painter and perhaps seek his work in the second sector, but no more than this. If these suppositions were valid, it would consequently follow that the groups identified in the first sector would be extraneous to the three painters: the Master of the Solomon cycle and his assistants, the Master of the Aristotle story and the architectural rosettes, the Master of the courteous couples, the Master of the acanthus swirls. Hence, it is evident there is a divergence between a more ancient culture and a more modern one, exactly as was found when examining the different parts.

4. Iconography: preliminary observations

Before discussing the matter of iconography and its decoding, some observations are necessary. One observation was made previously, when Levi [8-12] and Di Marzo [2-3] were mentioned, regarding the fact that the ceiling of the Steri represents a sort of medieval encyclopaedia. Another, again by Di Marzo, refers to the belief that it must have been “an organic mind” which conceived the design, and another which decided to transfer a material usually used in wall paintings to the beams of a ceiling.

On this last point, however, whereas Levi believes that the creators of the cycle did not realize that by transferring a material used for wall paintings, which have a much larger surface, to a forcibly reduced surface, it would have made their reading difficult, Bologna [18] opines that ease of reading was never a requirement that was deeply felt by medieval artists, despite the belief that paintings should have moral and didactic purposes. If this were not the case, it would be difficult to understand why the upper parts of frescoes or mosaic cycles of the period are not that easy to discern, and even more challenging to read.

4.1. Identification of the depicted subjects

To get to the heart of the matter, it must be said that scholars had already started doing research to interpret the iconography, but greater insight is obtained with Bologna's analysis by eliminating two of the methodological criteria which had limited it until then.

Levi proceeds by classifying the various themes by subject – hunting and love scenes, legendary traditions, the legends of Tristan and, of Troy, biblical legends and so on – without considering the position the various cycles occupy on the ceiling beams and regardless of whether a certain theme is present elsewhere before or after 1377-1380.

This way of proceeding, which flattens the perspective, is overcome by Bologna by relocating the sequences in their place and respecting the typology of the story, and the various themes, places and times of iconographic tradition.

Thus, the cycle is read normally, from left to right, from sector A to sector B with one's back facing the first inscription of 1377, in which the scenes are on the band of the beams facing the floor, and on the band facing the same inscription. The criterion is reversed when the scenes are on the opposite lateral band, i.e., facing the writing of 1380.

Continuing his analysis, Bologna notes that the iconography of certain scenes is re-interpreted respecting tradition, even if, on closer inspection, earlier examples do exist. A good case in point is the story of the Judgment of Solomon (Figure 5) which had such an extraordinary literary and iconographic diffusion that it was illustrated in several ancient works and used in Persian, Arab and Turkish texts and medallions-amulets dating back to the 4th-5th century A.D. where Solomon is depicted as a knight slaying a she-devil.

An allusion to this tradition and in particular a link with the iconography of the medallions can be found in the confrontation between the knight, Solomon, and a demonic entity depicted in the ceiling of the Steri, hypothesizing the possibility that variants of the biblical story followed the direction of the Jewish diaspora, but without ruling out an Arab-Islamic direction, which, however, represented an important link for Sicilian Jews.

What is unusual is the fact that the narration of the Judgment is done in such an analytical way – sometimes including solutions to different themes – as to have no comparison in traditional iconography.

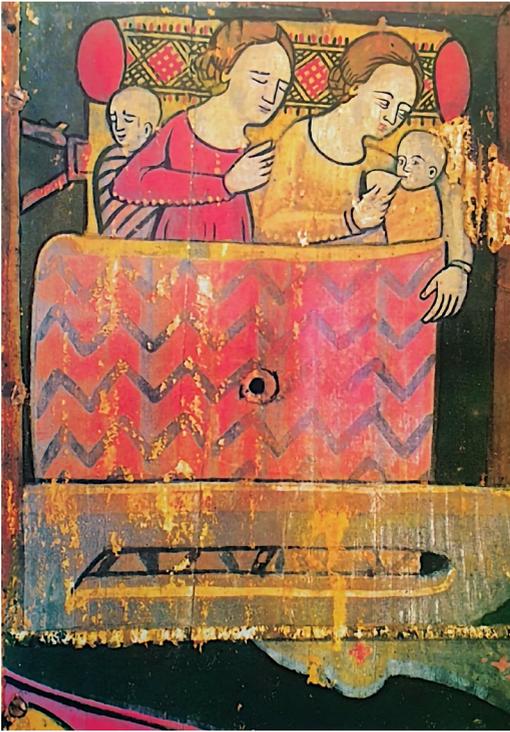


Figure 5. Master of the Judgment of Solomon. Story of the Judgment of Solomon: the two mothers in bed [18].

As for the legend of Tristan and Isolde, from an iconographic point of view, it is difficult to make any comparison due to the scarce European iconography of the story. The few matches made with some French ivories, describe different moments of the legend recurring in other parts of the ceiling. A new element stands out, however, in the narration, one in which the female is the dominant figure compared to the chivalrous hero. It is an element that reappears in other stories, such as, for example, that of Susanna (Figure 6), often mentioned in the medieval debate on the moral value of women. Finding this element in the context we are dealing with is a significant issue, as it reinforces the myth of female reserve which, although undermined and slandered by those who are rejected, ultimately triumphs with public acknowledgement of the woman's preserved chastity and punishment for the slanderer.



Figure 6. Master of the Judgment of Solomon. Story of Susanna: Susanna in the bathroom spied on by the old men [18].

As regards the specific iconographic design of the final scene in Susanna's story, it is worth noting there is a lack of evidence in the biblical text, whereas it can be found in a Tuscan-Venetian version of the story dating back to the 14th century, and in 15th century miniatures and French ivories, which in turn, links them to a theatrical representation of 1477.

Even if it is not known whether the painter of the Steri was familiar with this version, Bologna nonetheless identifies another that goes back as far as the 9th century, from which it can be deduced that this version, to which a precise iconographic tradition was linked, must have been known for several hundred years in Europe.

As to how it arrived in Sicily, Bologna suggests two possible routes: the western one, which was the same source from which the Gothic world drew, or the eastern one of Syro-Palestinian origin, which used the same Jewish or Islamic route hypothesized for the legend of Solomon.

In the following scenes the theme of paying homage to women continues to be a sort of narrative thread, as in the story of Judith and Helen of Narbonne, until it returns and presents itself with the typical features of medieval misogyny, as in the unusual and grotesque scene of Aristotle letting himself be ridden by a courtesan (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Master of Aristotle. Aristotle ridden by a courtesan [18].

The scene of the “Fountain of Youth” also deserves a mention, and is nothing but the figurative projection of the inextinguishable desire for preservation and rebirth in the vigour of life and amorous pastimes, the primary condition of the relationship between man and woman (Figure 8). The oldest memory we have of this scene is that of the Castle of Valenciennes, which dates back to 1375.

Overall, however, it must be said that the iconographic content follows autonomous versions with respect to corresponding ones elsewhere. There are also many minor scenes, which often refer to the theme of the juxtaposition of men and women, and hunting and cavalry scenes. One such scene represents a knight of the Chiaromontanes,

indicated by the saddle cloth of the horse, who unseats an opponent, forcing him to surrender: an example of tribute to the noble life and pride for the caste, confirmed by the series of coats of arms of the most noble Sicilian families which, together with the royal coats of arms of Aragon and Sicily, flank all the representations.

Levi, on the other hand, made a notable contribution by identifying the cycle of the stories of Troy [8-12], and also established that they illustrate some chapters from the "Historia destructionis Troiae" by Guido delle Colonne, a judge from Messina who wrote the Latin text between 1270 and 1287.



Figure 8. Master of Aristotle ridden by a courtesan. The fountain of youth [18].

This cycle is not depicted in a continuous manner on the various side faces of the beams, but is divided into various well-defined episodes, most of which are accompanied by explanatory writings. Once the first nucleus of scenes is concluded, a marked interruption appears followed by scenes that alternate with large aniconic bands. The cycle concludes with scenes of the Judgment of Paris and the Sacrifice of Iphigenia. They include a sequence, however, neglected by Levi, which, due to the disfigurement caused by bad conservation conditions, was almost illegible. It narrates the story of the preparation for the sacrifice of Iphigenia and three other sequences he strangely considered to be separate, which depict episodes relating to the abduction of Helen, the landing of Helen on the Trojan beach with her solemn entry into the city and, finally, the wedding between Helen and Paris.

Bologna supports these matching elements, not only on the basis of logical, topographical and figurative evidence, but also on the basis of the fact that in two Venetian illuminated manuscripts of the fourteenth century, identified by Buchtal [20] in Madrid and Geneva, which contain the text and illustrations of the "Historia" by Guido delle Colonne, exactly the same scenes appear.

This shows that the story is divided into three sections which are arranged in such a way as to make them appear separate from each other. However, the real theme is

not the destruction of Troy, but three parts of it, as indeed in the other stories of Solomon, Judith, Susanna, Helen of Narbonne, etc. And all the examples are centred on female figures relating to misogynistic or philogynous allusions, in a more or less declared way: female figures such as Isolde, Medea, Hesione, Helen, Iphigenia, each of which is linked to a precise moral judgment.

Thus, a series of opposing examples is created which, from an iconographic-iconological point of view, represents a crucial moment to try to understand the meaning of the parts of the ceiling in which they appear.

Not only that, the different moments in the Trojan cycle represent an important reference point, also in verifying the degree of autonomy the designer of the cycle had, with respect to iconographic tradition.

Thanks to Buchtal's systematic studies on the two aforementioned Venetian manuscripts from Madrid and Geneva, it can be stated that in Europe in the late Middle Ages – over a period of one century, from the mid-13th to the mid-14th century, in a geographical area that goes from Paris to Venice and from Castile to Naples – an iconographic continuity of the “Trojan” subject is manifested in numerous examples which are connected to each other.

But perhaps the iconography of the Steri's Trojan cycles has no point of contact with the line of development indicated above and its matrix is very different. Which matrix is it? It could be hypothesized that between 1287, the year in which Guido delle Colonne completed the “Historia”, and 1377, the year in which the painting of the Palermo ceiling began, a codex of the same “Historia” had appeared somewhere, illustrated according to principles that were different from those of the two Venetian codes, and from which the iconographer of the Steri may have drawn, though using it with great freedom.

Among the identified scenes are those of the story of David and Goliath, the legend of Saint George who kills the dragon and saves the princess, of Bathsheba, David and Uriah, all stories in which the theme of women is central.

There are also numerous scenes that are difficult to identify, with subjects taken from the classical world which have been handed down through medieval short story literature in the romantic manner, peculiar to that period.

It is interesting to note how, in some of these scenes, the story once again revolves around a woman and the consequences of her love affairs. From this, it is clear that the iconographer is continuing his discourse on the moral value of the woman, which is the dominant motif and is rendered, moreover, with a truly remarkable variety of allusions.

Bologna then makes a separate statement regarding several scenes from the cycle concerning the story of the death of Dido, the story of King Evil-Merodach, the scenes for the Grant Mersi, and the sequence derived from the Apocalypse. They are stories whose iconography is known, owing to the descriptive features and probable sources, while, from the point of view of interpretation, the usual pro-misogynistic theme prevails, and where, in the last part of the ceiling, examples favouring women stand out.

To sum up, it can be said that:

1. The cycles of the Steri, in which traditions and thematic innovations converge, reveal a remarkable timeliness in the information when one considers the transformations that took place in Gothic Europe during the fourteenth century.
2. It emerges that the iconographer had considerable freedom of expression, in the short story narratives, in the Trojan cycle and in the biblical sequences.
3. This freedom is supported by a series of important changes, concerning both the content in the texts and current iconographic versions, in order to be able to adapt the story to a different context from the one for which it was originally intended.

And this is the focal point of the matter: the figural representation of the various historical, biblical and fictional topics, and their very choice, were made to be understood from a precise didactic-illustrative perspective rather than from a historical-narrative one, a method which has also penetrated the visual arts.

4. The debate on the moral value of woman appears central in the Chiaromonte cycle together with the contrast between the praises and the slanders she receives, but it is, nevertheless, mainly defamatory.
Traces of the origins of the theme of women can be found in echoes of remote eastern, biblical and classical provenance, in the concept of Christianity and in the atavistic and firm conviction of male superiority.
It is a theme that continues to be debated in various forms as time progresses. An interesting parallel is the way in which the theme is treated in the Steri ceiling and in "Contrasto delle donne", written by the Florentine, Antonio Pucci, before 1375-77, a circumstance which, given the substantial similarities, could lead us to hypothesize that the iconographer from Palermo was familiar with the text.
5. The significant convergence between the method and conclusions in Pucci's "Contrasto" and the designs in the ceiling of Palazzo Chiaromonte ends when considering the different paths they then take. In fact, while the "Contrasto" proposes several "exempla" and then discusses them by linking arguments for and against to each one, in the Steri ceiling the criterion of counterposing a negative example to the positive one is used. In this, the ceiling appears closer to another type of literary composition, represented by the Piedmontese novel "Le chevalier errant", also from the fourteenth century.
6. Again on the theme of women, the conclusion on the ceiling appears to be different compared to the previous ones, in that, in the case of the Steri the debate ends, without any compromise, with the apocalyptic vision that reiterates the final victory in the philogynous arguments.

At this point of the investigation, one inevitably wonders who the organiser was, the iconographer, the organic mind that conceived the ceiling and what was the occasion that led Manfredi Chiaromonte to have such a ceiling painted. The answer to the first question may be found at the court of Manfredi III, where in the years in which the work was carried out, it was well-known that the figure of the physician, Perino da Corleone, held a position of great importance, as he was an expert in various fields of knowledge and linked to the Da Cremona family, which counted among its members men of great cultural standing. Perino's prominent position and the historical fact that one of the ceiling painters also came from Corleone, leads us to identify him as the person who planned the iconography of the ceiling, a hypothesis recently confirmed by Evelina De Castro [21].

As for the second question, it is necessary to evaluate an aspect that will give a more than plausible answer to the circumstance in question. In the ceiling, from the first lacunar, the coat of arms of the Ventimiglias is opposite that of the Chiaromontes (Figure 9), a combination which recurs insistently. It is justified by the fact that Eufemia Ventimiglia was Manfredi's second wife, and they were most probably married in 1377. Besides, in the same year, it seems that after the death of Frederick III the Simple, Sicily was divided into four vicariates, one of which fell to the Chiaromontes and one to the Ventimiglias. It is therefore possible that the marriage between Manfredi and Eufemia Ventimiglia was part of Manfredi's desire to extend his power, which also justifies, among other things, the pre-eminent role of the didactic-moralizing theme of women in the iconography of the painted ceiling, due to the need to remind his new wife of the risks and duties associated with her chosen condition.

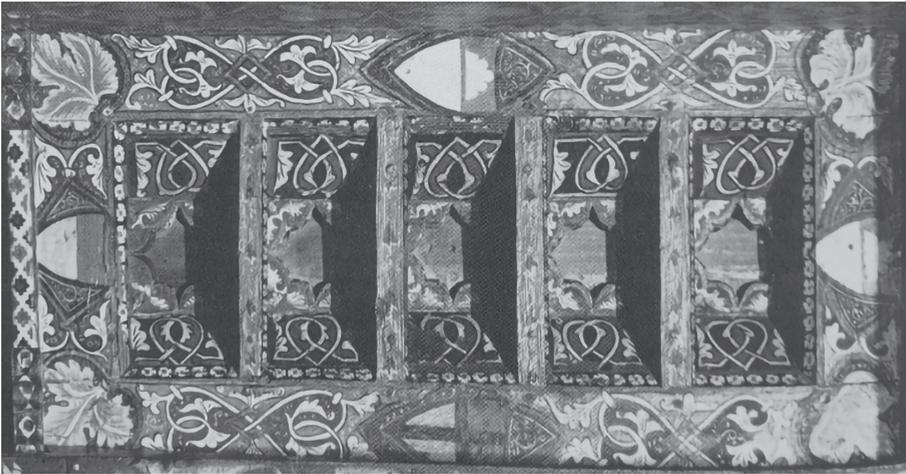


Figure 9. Master of Aristotle ridden by a courtesan and others. The Chiaromonte and Ventimiglia coats of arms and vegetal friezes [18].

4.2. Iconological interpretation

The symbolic and allegorical meanings of the subjects depicted have already been mentioned in the previous paragraphs, and yet it is worth dwelling further on what appears to be the central theme of the pictorial cycle in question: the moral value of women.

Numerous examples of the theme appear: among them, a girl with a flower in her hand and the *homo selvaticus*, depicted facing each other; another portrays a girl with a flower similar to the previous one and two lovers embracing; they refer, on the one hand, to the contrast between feminine gentleness and wild masculinity, and on the other, virginal modesty and the passion of the senses on the other. In another, on one side, appear three young girls in the act of playing various stringed instruments against a backdrop of flowering trees and, on the other, are three fighting Crusaders with drawn swords who have just finished killing the infidels at their feet: an example which shows an interesting relationship between the three warriors and the three maidens, recalling what Monteverdi would call “the songs of warriors and lovers”.

Another case in which the female role is highlighted is represented in the Judgment of Solomon, where the painter, instead of emphasizing the role of Solomon, highlights the role of the two mothers and their contrasting behaviour by rewarding the innocent and punishing the deceiver.

Even in the stories of Tristan and Isolde, it is the latter who prevails, just as in the story of Susanna, in which importance is given to the ethical myth of female reserve and the value of women, or in the story of Judith, where homage paid to a woman contrasts with the representation of amorous pastimes (Figure 10), or in another, the story of Helen of Narbonne, where, however, the figure of the treacherous chambermaid emerges as the one who causes Elena’s ruin. In fact, the female theme is not always treated in a positive way, and often characteristics featuring misogyny and anti-feminism prevail in the representation.



Figure 10. Master of the Judgment of Solomon. Story of Judith: Judith dines with Holofernes and then kills him in his sleep [18].

Even in the minor scenes there is no shortage of ideas that refer to the initial theme of the contrast between man and woman. Incredibly, this opposition even extends to the animal level, as in the case of two leonine griffins chasing each other, which clearly appear as male and female; or the case of two bears seen from behind, which appear, from their attitude, to be two bears in love, and are clearly identified and diversified in sex by the respective words *Ursus* and *Ursa*. The erotic counterpoint and the theme of women recur countless other times also in the stories of Troy, always with declared misogynistic or philogynous allusions. Thus, in the stories of Medea and Jason, Hesione, Helen, and Iphigenia, not only scenes of offenses, acts of revenge, seduction, sensuality, and dalliances, alternate with each other, virginity, innocence, and sacrifice appear too, each time symbolised in a female figure who embodies either good or evil.

Here, the famous legend of the unicorn deserves a mention, since it is connected to the medieval symbology of female virginity and at the Steri appears in three different sequences. The most interesting depicts a girl who, with her right hand, raises a mirror in the shape of a monstrance, which probably symbolises the relationship between the animal's purity and the woman's virginity and, with her left hand, grabs the long horn of the animal which, as it turns towards the mirror, is mortally wounded by a warrior's sword (Figure 11).

Even the biblical story of David and Goliath is a story about women, where, in the scene in which David advances with his sword and the severed head of Goliath, a girl comes forward with a crown in her hand, probably representing King Saul's daughter, who he promises to David in marriage. The same purpose can be attributed to the scene that depicts the legend of St. George and the dragon with the exemplum of the princess rescued from the jaws of the dragon and also to the scene that illustrates the story of Bathsheba, David and Uriah, which condemns lust and David's adulter-



Figure 11. Second master of the second sector. Above: frieze of warriors and foliage. The capture of the unicorn. Below: detail of the capture of the unicorn [18].

ous and overbearing love for Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, whom David sends to war, as well as to his death.

Even in the scenes that are not easy to decipher, young girls are always the prominent subject. Hence, it clearly emerges that the dominant motif is always a female one, expressed, moreover, with a truly remarkable variety of allusions and detailed thematic research. The whole expressive range of profane 'courtliness' is in fact there, to underline the guiding motif, interweaving the characteristic themes of female life with those connected to male life, such as hunting and the training of falcons, which then becomes a symbol of the plots devised by women to ensnare and subdue men.

Instead, in the last section of the ceiling depicting the story of Dido and the Apocalypse, there are more scenes which present a favourable view of women. In particular, the scenes in the Apocalypse start with the symbol of the woman-Madonna, against which the forces of evil can do nothing; they then move on to the contrast between Babylon, the great "harlot", and the celestial Jerusalem in which everything is pure, thus affirming the final victory of the philogynous arguments with the exemplum of the Madonna, a position that has never been questioned.

5. The historical, social and ideological context

The true historical and social roots of the Chiaromonte ceiling are to be found, unequivocally, in the feudal world. According to Di Marzo [2-3], the link with feudalism is expressed not so much by the mythical, historical, heroic, and religious representations, as by the various facts, anecdotes, customs and curiosities that give a very precise historical framework to which the ceiling is related.

This framework begins to take shape when, in 1363, a document was signed, with which the Sicilian barons, concluding the feudal disputes that had tormented the island for years, wrested from Frederick III the Simple the approval of a previous agreement, which stipulated that Sicily was to be divided into areas where the most important baronial families had more influence.

Given that Frederick III's (also known as Frederick the Simple) heir, Maria of Aragon was underage, the appointment of the four Vicars after his death, institutionalized the undisputed domination of the island, which, in fact, had already been established with feudalism.

However, while Sicilian baronage maintained its role in part, it suffered a serious blow with the armed return, of the Aragonese in the early 1390s, as they were intent on recovering control of the island and re-establishing the rights of the crown. The main protagonists of these events were the Chiaromontes, the most active undoubtedly being Manfredi III, who managed to considerably increase his personal supremacy, reaching a position of almost royal power, a 'cryptolordship', as the studies of Patrizia Sardina have demonstrated [22].

But the fortunes of the family began to decline with the death of Manfredi III. Nonetheless, he remained a protagonist in these events and a leading figure in Sicily's socio-political matters in the second half of the fourteenth century and it was he who ordered the Steri ceiling to be executed, in 1377, the year in which he was appointed Vicar. Its execution, however, remained an isolated episode in the second half of fourteenth century Sicily, above all as a consequence of the social and ideological detachment of feudalism. Moreover, this is evident from the fact that the baronial palace was part of the urban structure of the city; it was separate and distant compared to the context, with its square shape, a symbol of absolute isolation – spiritual, physical, social – almost as if it were a plastic representation of class discrimination.

This is especially true if one considers the cultural and artistic, or even cosmopolitan, knowledge, underlying the work in question, whose origins are definitely aristocratic: from the Islamic art of the Maghreb and the Alhambra, born in the respective courts, to the Spanish and mudejar art of the courts of Castile and Aragon, to Neapolitan art, a product of the Angevin court, to Franco-English art, expression of a "courtly" vision.

In short, the Steri's culture is part of the international culture of the European aristocracy of the late fourteenth century, a culture which appears to be the exemplary consequence of the isolation of the courts in the social context of belonging.

To better understand Chiaromontane architecture and explain its alternating fortunes during the 19th and 20th centuries, it is useful to read the studies of Emanuela Garofalo, Marco Rosario Nobile and Pierfrancesco Palazzotto [23-24].

It remains to be seen how the ideological adherence of the authors of the ceiling to the specific characteristics of the Courtly Style was expressed⁵. First of all, through the noble coats of arms, whose presence and number symbolically represent the noble self-glorification of the medieval chivalric aristocracy, together with the awareness of the aesthetic value of such self-glorification. It follows that nobility and beauty are as-

pects of one single thing, indeed, beauty is not only a consequence of nobility but is an inherent feature that derives from its social election.

In addition to this, since the coats of arms of other families and the royal houses of Aragon and Naples also appear in the ceiling (together with Bavaria, Bohemia, Burgundy, Brunswick-Monferrato, Castile-Leon, Clermont or Papacy, Jerusalem, Portugal, Hungary) [20], it is probable that the desire to exalt their rank is associated with the idea of exalting their peers, thus transforming the representation of their nobility into a celebration of this institution, driven by a marked pride in their class; pride is seen, moreover, as an ethical ideal or an ideal of life related to piety and virtue, in other words to honour, a key element in the life of these nobles. The heraldic exaltation of the nobility and the incarnation of virtues in the noble figure stems from the secular and profane character of the work, a character that favours a secular life over an ascetic one, typical of the feudal-aristocratic vision of the world, especially in international late Gothic culture. But, in speaking of the Steri, neither can the fact that this phenomenon is also found in the thirteenth-fourteenth century culture of Western Islam, be ignored.

6. From the past to the present: educational opportunities and prospects at the University of Palermo

The Steri passed to the University of Palermo, as mentioned earlier, in 1967, and was the most important moment in the life of the monument, due to the strong symbolic value represented by the bond established between them, which, right from the start, made it the centre of the University. It became the representative seat of the Rectorate and was committed to fully financing its restoration and recovery: a recovery that continued over the years and was not only limited to the Sala Magna, but progressively extended to include the structures of the whole area.

It should also be noted that the Steri became the seat of the University Rectorate at a moment in which it was undergoing a transformation, making it more profoundly democratic and thus, from being an elite cultural institution it became a vital organism, a participant in current problems, the emblem of a culture open to everyone. Not only that, just as in the years when it was the seat of the Inquisition, the Steri was a paradigmatic place for cultural oppression and dogmatic violence, so today, as a university seat, it is a place institutionally suited to freedom of thought and experimentation.

The University of Palermo was founded in 1806. In just over two hundred years, it has become a powerful scientific and cultural force, whose students, teaching and technical-administrative staff and offices (not only in Palermo, but also in Agrigento, Caltanissetta and Trapani), are the expression of a dynamic activity that produces culture, research, innovation, training and employment, while promoting social and territorial development.

The University offers a wide range of courses and is divided into a number of degree syllabi that cover the entire gamut of disciplines from the humanities, including the arts, cultural heritage, communication and social sciences, to law, politics, economics, medicine, biology, chemistry, physics, maths, and agrifood, architectural, engineering and information technologies.

Academic standards are high, and there are a multitude of training and professional opportunities, as well as a strong focus on the dynamics of internationalization and building relations with foreign universities to collaborate on various projects.

Palermo's position, in the centre of the Mediterranean, also makes it the historical crossroads of the peoples from across the water, as indeed is visible in the city's cul-

ture and way of life, which are the result of the encounter, overlapping, crossing and integration of different histories and traditions.

Aware of this historical and cultural reality, the University of Palermo fosters relationships between young people of different nationalities, promoting its network of services, supporting students in their university career with the Centre for Orientation and Tutoring, providing language lessons with the School of Italian for foreigners and legal support with the Human Rights Legal Clinic, medical assistance with the University medical clinic and, lastly, helping disabled students with transport and accompaniment services, personal assistance and peer tutoring.

Special attention is also paid to the possibility of facilitating the study and attendance of young asylum seekers, or those in possession of international protection, as well as that of concretely guaranteeing the right to gender identity, given the fact it is a basis of the fundamental right to personal identity.

Hence, there seem to be numerous reasons to study in Palermo: the geographically strategic position of the city, its international character, the vast and diversified educational offer, the peculiarity of the research objectives with the added value of the research products themselves, the recognition of students' centrality and needs, the wide-ranging cultural offer (the University network of museums and other museum networks, libraries, cultural events, tourist and cultural attractions of excellence, food and wine traditions), the sports available at the University Sports Centre, whose numerous services guarantee students the possibility of combining study and free time, and moreover, provides concessions and benefits for student-athletes attending didactic activities and compulsory internships.

Notes

¹ The name of the building referred to as Steri, derives from the low Latin *Hosterium*, and was used to indicate various Sicilian buildings of the time.

² The mudéjar ceilings, also called *artesonados*, are wooden ceilings in which additional, often, interlacing strips are applied on the beams that support the roof to form decorative geometric patterns.

³ In Spain, the term *mudejares* refers to Muslims who remained faithful to their religion even after the Christian reconquest. To them we owe the continuation of Hispanic-Arab art in a style which, though presenting several variations, is essentially a faithful continuation of the Muslim tradition. It is, essentially, a Christian style that incorporates elements of Arab inspiration.

⁴ Sumptuary art is defined as a particularly sumptuous art form, often linked to the processing of precious materials (gold, silver, precious stones, etc.) and to the creation of laquers, stuccos, miniatures, tapestries.

⁵ International Gothic, International Style or Courtly Style, is a style of figurative arts, datable to between the end of the fourteenth century and mid-fifteenth century. As the different names indicate, it spread internationally and had many characteristics in common, as well as many local variables. However, the style did not spread from a central starting point to then propagate itself, it was, rather, the result of a dialogue between the European courts which was favoured by the numerous reciprocal exchanges. Its features included the accentuation of many Gothic mannerisms, particular and realistic observation, accurate presentation of the details, the brightness of the colours, a predilection for extremely elegant, refined forms, thus making it appear to be the fruit of a courtly, privileged society.

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Summary

The aim of the paper is to present the study carried out by the art historian Ferdinando Bologna on the painted ceiling of the Steri in Palermo in an informative but less

formal way, so as to make it more accessible and, therefore, more enjoyable for a wider audience of enthusiasts and not just experts of the subject.

The study examines a monument of exceptional importance for the city of Palermo, highlighting not only the nature of its extraordinary repertoire of late medieval fables, but also its significance as a document of important historical, iconographic, documentary and literary value.

It also underlines what the Steri represents for Palermo University as a symbol of its roots in the city context and of the historical-evolutionary continuity of Sicilian society.

The work concludes with a brief reference to the importance that the University of Palermo has assumed in the little more than two hundred years since its establishment, transforming itself from a cultural institution for the few, to a symbol of a culture open to all, dynamically projected towards a future of growth and innovation.