

The Palio of San Paolino

by David Mayernik

The Palio of Lucca, and the competition for painting it, represents a notable contemporary opportunity to revive not only the traditions of the crossbowmen, but also the figurative arts and their civic role. There is not a more important reason for the arts than that, and I'm honored to have the opportunity to contribute to the celebrations of 2013.

From Raphael to Guido Reni, many Renaissance and Baroque artists painted palios for large and small cities; these are at once processional banners and paintings proper. I tried with this image to remember that it has to be both an icon and a painting. As an icon, in particular one carried in procession, it has to be clear and recognizable for who is being represented and within which tradition – in this case the image depends on the tradition of the *Mater Misericordia* and the protector saint. As a painting, instead, it has to satisfy expectations about brushstroke, color and perspective, and many other aspects that render it a work of art. The balance between these two I tipped slightly toward the second, which puts it more definitively in the Renaissance tradition than the medieval or Byzantine. Even if I work in that mode anyway, given the fourth and fifth centenaries of the city walls, the seventeenth century date of the miracle of San Paolino, and the fifteenth century origins of the *Compagnia Balestrieri*, a classical/Renaissance approach is appropriate at the symbolic level. I did not create an imitation, nor a pastiche: it is instead a new work of art, rendered in the classical language, and in emulation of other artists who have dealt with the same type of image.

The figure of San Paolino rightly dominates the palio, but at the same time is in the background of the image, in a certain sense an invisible protector of the crossbow competition and those that celebrate

it. As in the miracle of 1664, his presence is represented in its effects, peace in particular. Instead of the cannon that miraculously didn't wound any of the pilgrims, we have the crossbow, already fired, and the target that holds the arrow. The target is mounted in a wagon wheel (as it was historically), whose twelve spokes symbolize the division of the city into *terzi* and *quartieri*. Instead of the pilgrims we have dancers in costume, who celebrate the shot with a dance in the form of a ∞ , symbol of eternity. The dance, like that of the figures in the fresco by Lorenzetti in Siena's Palazzo Pubblico, means that good government, traditions, and the harmony of the city continue from the past into the future. The walls that the saint holds in his hands double the dance, in the form of a ring that represents continuity, integrity, and serenity. If in the past the city walls protected the city from the outside, today it could be said that they also protect the natural landscape beyond the walls, as integral an aspect of the image of the city of Lucca as its churches and towers.

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The miracle of San Paolino occurred on July 12th in 1664, during a religious celebration in the saint's honor. As was the tradition, cannons were fired as part of the celebratory rite; however they were accidentally directed to a group of worshipping pilgrims who were entering the city at Porta San Donato. Miraculously no one was injured, and it was believed that the saint himself intervened on their behalf. The supernatural event has been preserved by the balestrieri, who now use the celebration to showcase their archery skills, using traditional crossbows and arrows. They've incorporated Renaissance dances in the festivities executed by Danze Antiche di Lucca, a local group who promote Renaissance dance and costumes.

The archery competition will take place in Piazza San Martino, in front of the Cathedral at 9.30 pm on 12 July. www.compagniabalestrierilucca.it/palio.php

Below: Balestrieri della Val di Lima, 23 June 2013

